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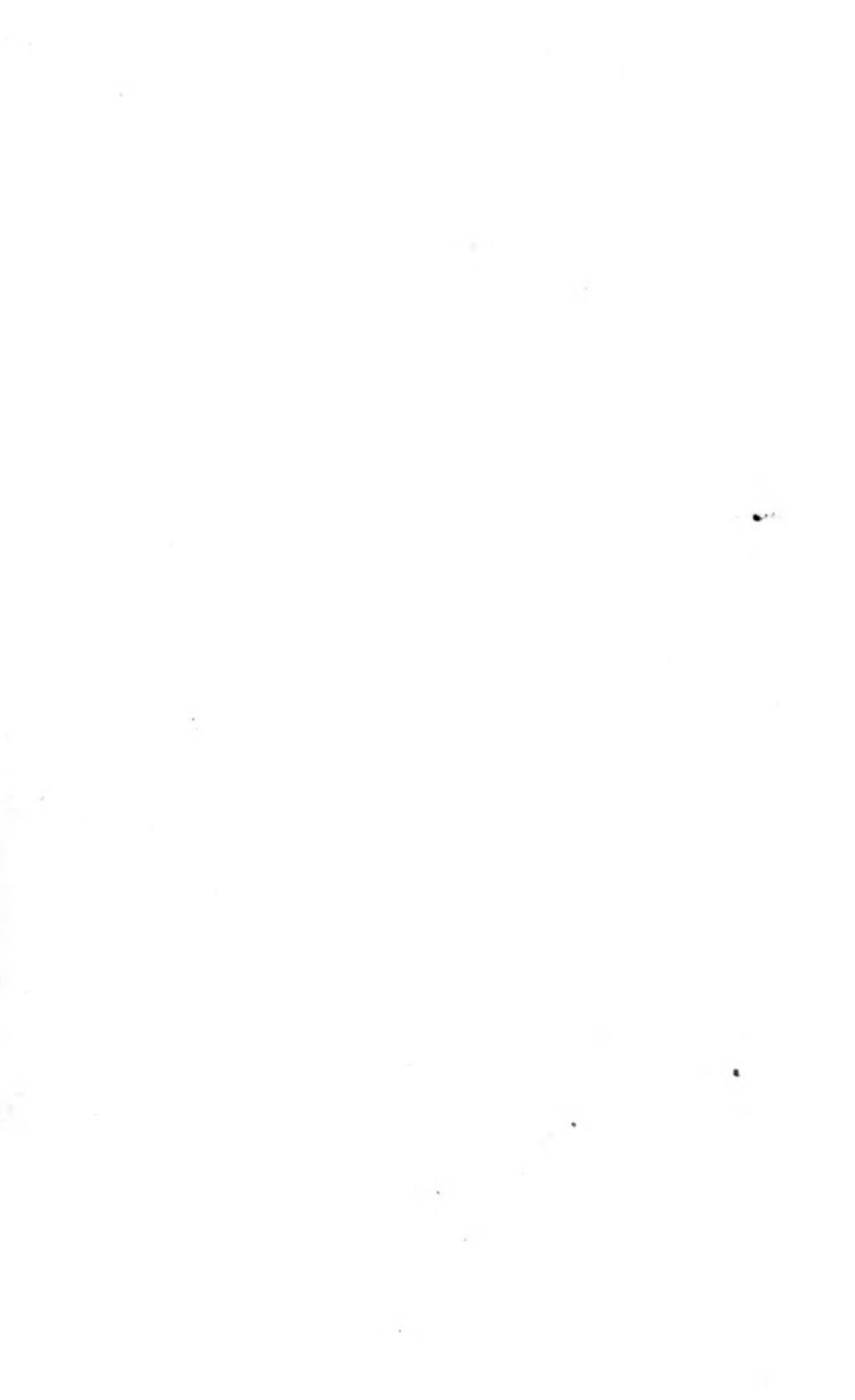
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GRASP YOUR NETTLE.

I.



GRASP YOUR NETTLE.

A NOVEL

BY E. LYNN LINTON,

AUTHOR OF THE "LAKE COUNTRY," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

"Tender-handed stroke a nettle,
And it stings you for your pains;
Grasp it like a man of mettle,
And it soft as silk remains."—AARON HILL.

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1865.

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GRASP YOUR NETTLE.

CHAPTER I.

“WELL, Aura, this is good news!” said Mrs. Escott, the wife of the Rector of Clive Vale, bustling into the drawing-room with a broad smile upon her round, red face. “Croft is really taken at last; I am so glad I cannot tell you.”

“So am I, mamma; it has been so long empty, and it is such a lovely place,” said Aura, smiling too from sympathy. “Do you know who has taken it?”

“A Mr. Trelawney; I believe that’s his name; a widower they say; so at least Jane told me,

and she ought to know, because Graves the butcher took some of the things from the station in his cart, and Jane and Graves are very thick, I am sorry to say, for I am sure I shall lose Jane some day, and then what shall I do, I should like to know? Such folly! flirting about with men like this."

"A widower?" asked Aura, avoiding the interpolated danger dexterously.

"Yes, a widower," coughed Mrs. Escott. "I hope he will be a pleasant neighbour; though it would have been better for me if there had been a wife, and then one could have talked to her about things. Mrs. Price does worry me so with her dreadful Low Church ways; and I am sure poor papa gets fretted into fiddle-strings with her and Mr. Bennet together; that he does! It would have been so nice now, if there had been a lady up at Croft."

"Yes," said Aura, "it would. But, perhaps, he will be nice by himself. I hope so, for we sadly want a few pleasant people at the Vale," she added laughing, but not ill-naturedly.

“ He is not very young,” continued Mrs. Escott ; “ but I dare say you young ladies will find him young enough to pull caps for. Take my word for it, Zillah and Sara Price will try for him, and those bold Campbell girls, too ; ” for Mrs. Escott, like all vulgar-minded women, had keen eyes for matrimonial possibilities, and was always marrying her younger friends ; though to do her justice she never seriously manœuvred, and usually contented herself with very harmless and transparent little efforts to “ get up ” desirable affairs.

“ Oh, mamma ! ” remonstrated Aura.

“ Well ? oh mamma, and oh papa too, if you like, it is very natural, is it not ? ” retorted her mother tartly. “ They must get married some time or other, I suppose, mustn’t they, Aura ? they are not all old maids like you.”

Aura laughed ; she always declined a combat with her mother when she could.

“ He has children though, I hear,” Mrs. Escott went on to say ; “ two children ; little girls who don’t speak English like Christians, but gabble to each other in some heathenish language, no one

can make out what, but Jane believes it to be French ; though I'm sure I don't know how she can tell whether it's French or German, or what."

"Poor little things ! what a misfortune to have lost their mother so young," said Aura pityingly.

"Yes," returned Mrs. Escott with a complacent sigh, smoothing her cherry-coloured capstring between her finger and thumb ; "no one can supply *that* place to them, whatever else they may have found !" emphatically.

"No ; at least not many," answered her daughter.

"Not many, indeed ! I like that, Aura ! None, I tell you, none ! The best stepmother that ever lived is not equal to a real mother, mind that. Else what becomes of natural affection and instinct, and all that, if a stranger can do as well ? Such impiety, indeed !—next door to Arianism, I declare it is. And so it would have done quite as well for you, I suppose, if I had died and papa had gone and married some one else ? You are not very complimentary, Aura ! "

"But, mamma, there are such things as bad

mothers, you know ; and surely womanly feeling counts for something in our relations. A sensible woman, even if a stepmother, must be a better guardian for children than a bad or foolish mother, for natural affection is not necessarily good sense, and our reason is higher than our instinct, is it not ? ”

“ Oh, I cannot pretend to follow you, Aura, when you get on your high horse like that ! ” cried Mrs. Escott. “ I declare you grow more and more pedantic and impertinent every day. Your father quite spoils you, he does, and encourages you in all your follies. All I know is that you are not very respectful to talk to me about bad mothers and foolish ones, as if I had not done my duty to you and Herbert—as I did, like few mothers, I can tell you, you impertinent girl ! ” she added, angrily ; for she had what they call “ a high spirit,” and bore ill with opposition ; especially from her daughter, whose independence of thought and character was a terrible stumbling block to her, and led to endless collisions between them. Indeed, half of Aura’s time

was spent in thinking how she could avoid giving her mother needless offence, and the other half in atoning for what she had given ; which perpetual dressing of sham wounds gave her life a wasted and unreal character, and made her intercourse with her mother unreal, too.

Sorry now that she had annoyed her, she flung down her book, and going up to her kissed her gently ; saying in a caressing voice—and it was such a caressing voice and such a loving face when she chose !—

“ But you know dear mamma, you are not to think I mean you when I speak of ‘ people.’ Don’t you know that I love you and think no one equal to you ? ”

And she kissed her again, Mrs. Escott resisting, and turning away her broad face, much flushed. At last, after suffering herself to be coaxed for some five or ten minutes, she gradually relented ; heaving deep sighs during the process and wiping her eyes frequently. For she was more weak than wicked in her tempers, and was really hurt at Aura’s words, honestly believing that she had

intended to throw some obscure slight on her own maternal character.

“There, my dear, that will do,” she said, with an air of patient resignation, to say the least of it rather trying. “It is all very well,” and she sighed again; “but when I am gone, you will then understand your mother’s real value better than you do now, and perhaps be sorry for much that you have said and done to her. Never mind; I will overlook it; and I dare say you will be sorry for it in your prayers to-night.”

Which was the formula that invariably closed their misunderstandings, and left Aura forgiven for faults she knew nothing of, and therefore was not sorry for. But it was established in Mrs. Escott’s mind, henceforth and for ever, that her daughter had somehow behaved ill to her in connection with this new tenant of Croft; and she never mentioned Mr. Trelawney’s name without a secret feeling that he had been the occasion of “a tiff, when she had had to put up with Aura’s temper.” She used to say afterwards that he began in their house with a bad omen, and she ought to have

been warned by it. Poor Mrs. Escott, she was always fighting with shadows !

A warm-hearted but easily offended woman, obtuse in general perceptions but keenly sensitive in matters of personal feeling ; always thinking herself intentionally slighted yet kindly natured, and, if flattered and made much of, easily pacified even under real wrong—but then she must be flattered and made much of; fond of gossip and not indisposed to scandal, by which, however, she meant no real harm to the individual slandered, but merely expressed her dramatic instincts and the want there was of healthy action in the Vale ; blundering, talkative, fussy, and affectionate, ignorant and essentially common-place (some people said vulgar), but with a capital opinion of herself and her own abilities, and not much prone to reverence others—not even her husband, whom indeed she ruled by the fleshy force of her nature,—she was what the country people called “a handful ;” and a rather larger handful to poor Aura than she could comfortably manage. The Rector had given up the attempt years ago. Aura

however, unfortunately for herself, had too marked a character and too strong an individuality (her mother called it “obstinacy”) to live so subordinate a life as was necessary to keep the peace with Mrs. Escott ; and, with every loving wish to please her, was continually falling into squabbles and disgrace, she scarcely knew how or why.

But indeed the opposition between them had begun from the beginning, when the then young mother had cried from vexation at the unwelcomed advent of the little daughter, being bent on a second son “to keep Herbert company ;” it had increased as the father’s natural delight in the child grew day by day, and was more and more lovingly expressed ; and it had received its final and immutable stamp when the pedantic old uncle, from whom were “expectations,” called in to christen the babe, declined to name her Laura after her mother, contending that Laura was rightfully a place not a woman’s name, and so called her Aura, as being truer classicality, instead. This was an accident and offence which Mrs. Escott, utterly outraged, could never forgive ; and

endless and most bitter were her bewailings thereat.

“ Such an outlandish name ! ” she used to say disdainfully ; “ neither Christian nor even heathen, a name just like Aura herself, no one knowing what to make of it ! If it had been Aurora now, that we could understand ; but Aura—what was Aura ? she wondered,” with a grimace. “ The rector said it meant air and breath, and all sorts of silliness, but for her part she didn’t want a daughter either air or breath, or anything so fly-away ; she would have been better content with a good honest Mary or Jane, or Susan even—though she did not like the name of Susan—that she could have understood, and who would have been like a daughter to her ! ”

So she fretted and fumed, and took to herself displeasure by the loveliness she could not fathom.

Everything that expressed a will or even a wish contrary to her own, was an offence to Mrs. Escott ; but no one offended so widely in this way as her daughter. It was an offence if Aura

wished to finish a picture before the paint got dry or the model passed away, when she wanted her to “just run round to the Hollies, and tell Zillah Price that old Betsy Brown *had* the missing tract after all ; the *Three Paths*, didn’t Aura know ? it had tumbled down behind the clock-case, careless old thing ; so Zillah need not trouble herself to ask Sally White about it when she went her rounds to-day.” It was an offence if she was reading when her mother wanted to be talking to her about the flirtations of her maids or the smart ribbons of the Sunday-school girls ; “she might as well be without a daughter if she was always so busy with her books she could not attend to *her*—such pedantry indeed ! but Aura was so pedantic—how could she be anything else with such a ridiculous name as she had !” It was an offence if she wrote a letter, to whomsoever it might be, and did not show it to her mother for approval. It was an offence if she was practising when her mother wanted her to “sit at her sewing with her for company.” All settled study was a direful offence ; and almost unpardonable, even with any

amount of caressing to make up, Aura's constantly recurring attempts to sit in her own bedroom that she might study the better. It was an offence if she corrected any error that her mother might make ; “she was not a school-girl or an idiot, to be taken to task by her own child,” Mrs. Escott used to say, when she blundered in her facts and Aura set her right : (she once said that Queen Elizabeth gave us Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights ; she constantly mistook between the Baltic and the Black Sea, because they both begin with B ; she did not know where to look for New Zealand on the map, but generally wandered off to South America vaguely ; and she always called Prussia and Austria and all the little states “Germany” in the gross, and would not be persuaded there were differences.) It was an immense offence if Aura did not like the same books that her mother liked, and she would sulk for half a day because Aura had defended a character or an opinion which she had attacked ; it was an offence if she thought for herself on any subject whatever, and her mother would quarrel

with her in real bitterness on such occasions ; in a word, every act of independent will and every evidence of growth and individuality was an insult to the maternal love of rule ; and Aura's life was made uncomfortable because she could not always remain a child, and because she grew up with an active intellect.

The Rector was a very different person. So long as the world would leave him in peace, he would leave it in the same ; haunting and oppressing no one. He had his own opinions, of course, and some few of them sharply defined and tenaciously held ; but only a few ; as a rule, his mental atmosphere was thick and hazy, where the outlines of most things were blurred or but faintly traced in ; a kind of “what does it matter ?” manner of thought, so long as peace and quiet could be preserved. It was well for him that he could sleep and hold his tongue as he did ; and that his wife's capacity for talk and propensity to interfere neither irritated nor disturbed him. Besides, he had his own little official domain where she could not possibly penetrate, and where he could be as conse-

quential as he chose; and though the parish did talk some ribaldry about the grey mare and the like, yet as he never heard it “what did it matter?” He “knew Mrs. Escott’s disposition,” he used to say; and “poor thing! let her have her own way if she likes!” So she had to her heart’s content, until Herbert and Aura grew up; and then she met with a check, and found to her disgust that children were not so easily managed as a husband, and that youth would have its own ideas and go its own way in spite of age.

There are various trial points in a woman’s life; it is a trial to her when her husband ceases to be her lover, and becomes a rather hard master instead; it is a trial to her when her hair first loses its softness, and grows harsh and broken and with the grey lines in it more obtrusive day by day; it is a trial to her when she is first ranked definitively among the dowagers, and the gentlemen pay her attention from good breeding not inclination; and it is a great trial to her when her children grow out of hand morally, as they had

done years ago physically, and set her authority aside for their first essays of free will. At least to women not content to grow old, and not wise enough to understand the necessities of time, all these are trials ; and as Mrs. Escott was one of those women, and as she was unable to see things or people in any relation save to herself, she could not of course undergo her inevitable disagreeables without much impatience and frantic efforts at resistance.

Also, what partly helped to make her so unpleasant as a housemate, was the fussy idleness and want of order in her life. She was always "dreadfully busy" about nothing ; and she made their small establishment of three maids and a man, of more housekeeping importance, and all the domestic events occasions of more home discomfort, than many a woman would have done with thrice the number of servants to look after. She had a bad memory and forgot things ; and when she served out her stores was sure to leave something behind ; so that there was a perpetual succession of telegrams from cook, for starch, or

soap, or sugar, or rice; or "missus h s forgot the currant jelly to-day," or, "la, Ma . why, there's never no kitchen tea; missus's forgot as usual." And any one who has lived with a forgetful housekeeper, tenacious of her keys, knows what an amount of jumping up from table and "just going for sugar," or "just filling the tea-caddy," or, "oh! I am so sorry, the jugged hare has no port wine in it; I forgot to give it out, and it was too late when I came home," there is throughout the day; what a life of perpetual piecing, and patching and jagged interruptions it entails; and what an utter absence of comfort there is where it exists. But how angry she would have been if any one had dared to hint that her housekeeping was not perfection!

The home she made was much against her daughter's nature in almost every particular; so that Aura really suffered under her rule, in that tacit, quiet, scarcely self-acknowledging way of sweet-tempered girls who are uncongenial to their lives, but who love the people that annoy them. But if her mother worried her, she was her father's

ding," and "*he* spoilt her," her mother said, "if there was no knowing which way to turn." Things were better when Herbert used to be at home, for he was his mother's pet, as Aura was her father's; though to be sure she worried him too, and often vexed his hot young soul almost beyond his power of bearing; but he and Aura used to help each other, and when times were harder than usual simply kept more out of her way. Now Aura was thrown entirely with her mother; and without in the least intending it, that dear, good lady nearly teased her life out, as she herself would have said, had she known the effect she produced. It was a matter of real thankfulness to her, then, that Croft was taken at last, and that mamma would therefore have something new to interest her and something more to do. For she knew what would come; though not all that would come.

Yet judging from externals Aura Escott ought to have been thoroughly happy and without a care. A father's idol and a mother's sole companion, young, healthy, intellectual, beautiful, and of

assured position, could there be a want in that well-found life? a flaw in the perfectness of her portion? If there was, it was one to which the world attaches no great amount of suffering; it was simply the need of companionship and the want of congeniality. Patience! and these too may come as time passes. In the meanwhile her beauty grew and ripened, till now at the age of twenty-one she was perhaps the loveliest girl in the county. Tall, graceful, but as stately as she was graceful; with a low, broad forehead on which lay thick bands of rippled, bright brown hair—dark grey eyes that changed with every feeling, but whether blue in the sunlight or black in the shadow, always soft and always steady—a full and much-curved mouth, the upper lip short and the lower rounded—and a skin that had caught in parts a colour from the golden shadows of her hair—she had something of both Grecian grace and Saxon strength; more loving than a western woman, and more individual than an eastern. She was emphatically a woman; not a plaything, and not a bad copy of a man. She was a real woman

—one to love and to be loved, to yield and yet to govern, to serve while being honoured. But though her father loved her he did not understand her; her mother thought her hard and selfish; and the Vale people were half afraid, and half contemptuous, ridiculing what they could not catalogue; which is always a safe way with the narrower and the denser.

The dullest place imaginable was this same Clive Vale where the Escotts lived; a place where life meant simply well-regulated social intercourse; where all good men walked by the pattern ruled for them by public opinion, and no one leapt beyond the mark of his comrade's feet. Nothing ever happened at Clive Vale. No one died; very seldom was any one ill; no one was born, or had the cholera, or went bankrupt, or was knighted, or committed suicide or murder or bigamy or forgery, or got into the papers anyhow. Why there had not been a marriage among the gentlefolks at least (and what has been said before applies only to the gentlefolks) for more than twelve years; and as for any love affairs—such

things were almost unknown—volcanoes but rarely breaking up the dead-level of ordinary life. The last person who had married out of the upper set was Miss Grainger, Patrick Grainger's sister; whom M. Delaperrière, the Parisian banker, met when she was staying with her aunt in London, and took away with him, to the scandal of the community. For even the double church service, and the Prayer-book to take out the taste of the mass-book, the consular office and the registrar's, scarcely hallowed a union between one of themselves and a Roman Catholic foreigner from over seas, in the estimation of the clarnish Vale which believed in nothing but itself. Miss Grainger however, being a young woman with a will, married in spite of them all; and went to France quite contentedly; and was very happy and gay and worldly and prosperous, and all that; but she was “poor Miss Grainger” still to the Vale, which could not bring itself to recognize her as Madame Delaperrière living in honourable matronhood like any one else; and which always held her as slightly reprobate, and worthy of Christian charity—not love. Mr. Patrick

was as little pleased with the marriage as any of them ; and as time went on but seldom heard from his sister, till sometimes a year or more would elapse before any letters passed between them, and then only formal communications, with as little heart as head in them.

Since her marriage then, no event of any importance had taken place beyond those which time itself necessarily makes. Some of the Campbell children had grown up, leaving two others—Kate and Ellen—still in the school-room ; but Miss Campbell and her next sister Lotty had blossomed out into fine-looking dashing girls ; indeed, the most dashing and inclined to worldliness (that meant prone to giggling and fond of bright colours,) of any in the place, and the young ones bid fair to follow the same pattern. They had no mother, poor things ; only a good old father, and four brothers out in various professions and coming down at intervals for visits in the summer ; frequently accompanied by friends of their own age, which the Vale thought savoured a little too strongly of design. Still it

did not answer, and Myssie Campbell and Miss Lotty did not “go off” any more than Zillah and Sara Price, or the Lawsons, or the Rowleys. Girls did not go off at Clive Vale, with brothers or without.

The Hollies was still tenanted by Mrs. Price, now a widow with two daughters, also of ripe age and unmarried ; but without brothers and of a serious turn of mind. It was they who instituted the Dorcas society ; it was they who spirited up Mr. Bennet, the curate, to forbid novels in the book-club ; they who divided the Vale into districts for the circulation of tracts (not soup), and who infused a severer spirit into the Sunday-school, to the increased distress of the scholars. Indeed they were invaluable to the young curate, and were his right hand, he used to say ; the common people wondering why he did not take up for good with Miss Zillah the elder and if anything the fairer, or with Sara the younger who had the best eyes. But though so invaluable to Mr. Bennet, Mr. Escott, good easy man of much flesh and torpid spiritualism, was rather teased by their

zeal, and often wished them slightly less energetic, and a trifle less awakened. However, as they were influential people in their way, they had to be conciliated.

Mr. Mountain, a solicitor, lived now at Laurel Grove—old Mr. Banks's place—a middle-aged man, with a small family and a common-place wife afflicted with an eternal cold. The old surgeon of the Vale was dead, and a smart young physician fresh from Edinburgh and Paris reigned in his stead. But the smart young physician, Dr. Hale—or as he was called by the country people in token of respect, Mr. Hale—though handsome and reported wonderfully clever—specially in fevers and with the knife—dropped his h's, and broadened out his i's when he talked, stuck his thumbs into his trousers' pockets, hanging his hands so to speak by the neck, or hooked them into his waistcoat arm-holes, or sat with his elbows bent outward and his hands turned inward, clasping his knees with his fingers. So he was not quite up to the Vale mark after all, and was only tolerated, not

cordially adopted. And then there was the curate, Mr. Bennet.

Mr. Bennet was a young man of twenty-six or thereabouts ; of puritanical appearance, extreme opinions, unnatural solemnity, contracted reading, and low academical standing. He was the declared enemy to all dancing, card playing, novel reading, games, races, and theatrical amusements ; he cared only for lectures, missionary meetings, and Bible readings (where he might lead the prayer, and expound the chapter), for Dorcas societies, school feasts, and district visitors' meetings, where he was pastor and patron ; in short he was a young man of decided spiritual self-satisfaction with the graft of Calvanism superadded. He was of a bilious temperament, and greatly prone to Christian wrath which he qualified as righteous ; but he was the idol at the Hollies, and even the lively Miss Campbells did not disdain him. He and Aura however were scarcely on such terms as befitted the curate and the rector's daughter ; and he had more than once spoken of her as unsound and a latitudinarian.

Who else was there? There was Miss Mason of Lea-lane Head, the chatterbox and general newsmonger of the place; and there was Mr. Patrick Grainger of Farm-End, reputed of vast secret possessions and of anti-matrimonial habits; an under-sized, straight-backed, small-headed gentleman, very precise and scrupulously clean, great in matters of etiquette, and piquing himself on his naughty knowledge—had he not been three years and eight months in London? but of severely strict principles, quick to discover evil, and fond of mysterious hints against the private lives of public personages. People more open-spoken than the inhabitants of the Vale would have called him suspicious and fond of slander. And there was Major Morgan, a soldierly, gentlemanlike, but sombre East Indian officer, given to boast of his “conversion,” and who, as well as Mr. Grainger, could have made one of those fair Vale damsels blessed so far as income went—we will not speak of temper—but did not; preferring a discursive illusion with all in turn to irrevocable relations with one. And a little lower in the social scale,

patronised while visited, were pretty Hannah Marks—as yet though quite a young girl; only thirteen or so; a year younger than the youngest Miss Campbell—and her quiet little aunt, “Aunt Dess,” daughter and sister of a deceased coal merchant; and a very handsome lad of eighteen, Harry Grant, articled to Mr. Mountain the solicitor, and the only son of a widow somewhere in Devonshire or Cornwall, where Mr. Mountain came from. About two miles from the village lived the Lawsons and the Rowleys, also families of young people of no special characteristics; and below these again came quite a multitude of the unpresentable, among whom this story does not lie.

And then there were the Escotts, binding all the rest together in the broad sheaf of clerical supremacy and rectorial hospitality. For the living being a fat one, and Mrs. Escott having “inherited,” they were the chief people in the Vale when Croft was uninhabited; though any one who could keep up Croft must needs be beyond even them in fortune and position. They

lowered their flag to no one else however; and saving this exception the Rectory was the finest, the best arranged, and the most desirable habitation of the neighbourhood.

To such a society as this, then, a widowed gentleman of fortune coming as the tenant of the best house, was a godsend of such magnitude as can scarce be credited by those living in more stirring places. The elder two Miss Campbells bought new cloaks, gowns, and bonnets a month earlier than usual:—"They spent a fortune on their dress," said the Misses Price, who, as became their more decided profession, affected simplicity and eschewed the vanities; and even old Miss Mason—hope being a hard liver—was seen prowling about the Croft demesne in gayer attire than usual; her Sunday bonnet with the yellow ribbons, and her blue silk gown on a week day, and in the woods too!

"Ridiculous old thing; fancy decking herself out like that for a stranger!" lisped Miss Lotty Campbell, putting back her ringlets with her hand, —for Miss Lotty's ringlets and taper hand were her

two points ; and she made the most of them ; like a sensible girl who understood values.

The Escotts, as the clergyman's family, were the first to call on Mr. Trelawney, though he brought no letters of introduction with him. But the society of the Vale was too small to lose one of its best houses for want of a mere formality. For, as it was argued in select committee, any one who bought and could keep up Croft (advertised in the local papers as a Mansion), must needs be well off ; consequently, respectable ; consequently again, fitted for the recognition of the Vale. But that point, though apparently so simple and logical, was not carried without opposition ; for Mr. Patrick Grainger, supporting himself on his known knowledge of the world, opposed this unsecured endorsement of “a mere stranger no one knew anything about and coming no one knew why or wherefore ;” and held it to be “rash” and “below their dignity.” “If he had wanted to know them,” he argued, “he would have brought something like a voucher for himself ; but now, he might be anybody or nobody, and the latter was

the more likely of the two. They had done the same thing in the Vale before, they must remember, and against his advice, too," he added, spitefully, "and finely they had burnt their fingers for their pains ;" alluding to that grave indiscretion respecting a certain fascinating German baron who had enthralled them all, save Mr. Grainger, for two years, though afterwards he left them by moonlight and in handcuffs. But though Mr. Grainger was a bachelor of available age and comfortable income, and not accustomed to be gainsaid when he offered an opinion, yet he was defeated to-day as in that matter of the Baron von Klugaugen ; and he left the Rectory where the select committee was held in high displeasure with every one ; even with his favourite Miss Aura ; and more than ever convinced that this new comer, this Mr. Trelawney of Croft, was a swindler in disguise. Whether swindler or not Mr. Patrick Grainger was his enemy.

The Escotts did not like to disoblige an old friend ; but what could they do ? It was unfortunate that Mr. Grainger was so obstinate, but

their own public duty was clear. So, when a sufficient time was held to have elapsed ; when Mr. Trelawney had been twice met, once by the Misses Price, and once by old Miss Mason, walking with his two children through the Long Meadow ; when the Croft gardens were reputed to be in perfect order, and white muslin curtains were spied against the drawing-room windows ; when the great square pew belonging to the mansion had been gorgeously furnished with crimson cloth and tremendously tall hassocks, and the Master and his family had stood up in their places as a two hours' show to the congregation ; then the Escotts led the way, and the whole Vale trooped after them, up and astir. Up and astir as is possible only to small country societies where the annual missionary meeting and the annual school feast are the two most important fasti of the year ; where the book club, managed by a zealous curate who excludes all novels and “ light reading,” and has the eyes of an Argus for “ dangerous doctrines,” comprises the whole of modern literature in general circulation ; where the press is

represented by the Conservative weekly issue of the county town, and the London penny papers are thought immoral and revolutionary ; where, if a man is called a Radical, it is almost equivalent to being called an atheist, and an atheist is something worse than a murderer ; and where the passions, the pleasures and the tragedies of human life find neither action nor room, neither echo nor response.

But though Mr. Trelawney returned all the calls made on him with scrupulous exactness, and at precisely the same relative intervals, he did not further cultivate the Clive Vale world ; and indeed it seemed very improbable that anything like familiar intercourse would ever be established between them. He did his public duty by them certainly, but he did it in an ungenial, haughty, uncomfortable manner, which made it more galling than absolute isolation would have been. He only entered into the smaller parts of the public life, though, declining to be a magistrate, and declining to be nominated one of the Board of Guardians ; but he joined the book-club when asked to do so,

and paid his subscription in advance. He offended the members, however, by never reading the books, and sending them on the day he received them, with the dates carefully entered in his beautiful handwriting ; and he offended them yet more by declining to avail himself of his privilege of membership, which, according to Rule III., gave him the power of ordering new books to the amount of forty shillings yearly, subject to the approval of the treasurer and secretary (Mr. Bennet). He declined with unnecessary haughtiness, as it seemed to some of them, objecting to the “ possible revision of any order of his by the secretary, as indicated by their rules,” and giving them to understand that he, Mr. Jasper Trelawney, was not in the habit of being thwarted, opposed, controlled, or taken to task by any such “ intellectual underling ” as Mr. Bennet. He used those very words, and they flew like wildfire through the place. He refused to speak at the school feast, though he allowed his children to go and see the schoolroom decked with flowers, and hung in festoons and mottoes. He refused a place on the

platform at the missionary meeting, but sent a handsome subscription—too handsome, insolently handsome, as indicating merely the power to give and no personal interest in the cause, some of the malcontents thought, but did not dare yet to say. He seldom went to church, as time went on; never when Mr. Bennet preached, after he had heard him once, though his children and servants attended regularly enough; and when asked by the curate “to aid him in working the parish satisfactorily”—meaning would he take a district and distribute tracts to the old women?—he told him, “with the pride of a lord speaking to a shoebblack,” said Mr. Bennet, a little green about the eyes and nose when he spoke, that he “despised all cant and humbug, and thought wholesome dwellings, sufficient food, and healthy recreation (the recreation Mr. Bennet himself had put a stop to) worth a whole library of badly-written pamphlets, full of unsound theories.”

The Sunday after this interview Mr. Bennet preached against him covertly as the “Pride of Intellect.”

These misdemeanors were perilous rocks to his popularity, which yet stood the trial as only the popularity of handsome widowers under forty and of large means could have done. But people said below their breath, “it was a pity,” and they “hoped his views did not go very far.” All this however would have gone for nothing comparatively, if Mr. Trelawney would have visited like any one else; but when one invitation after another was refused—when Mrs. Price made lemon cheese-cakes and sent to the county town for partridges and a raised pie, instead of the usual chicken and tongue for supper (for the Vale, as a rule, gave only evening parties, friendly teas with round games or a little dance, and a sit-down supper to conclude), and even this unwonted outlay was in vain—when Miss Mason gave one of her pleasantest card-parties, also in vain—when Major Morgan knocked up a bachelor supper, hoping to be the first whose incense would be accepted, and yet to him, a Queen’s officer, the new comer was obdurate—when the Campbells arranged a monster Christmas dance, to which

even Mr. Patrick Grainger proposed his being invited, saying to the sisters jocosely, “As you young ladies seem to be mad about this fellow, *I* will bring him ;” (but they had been too quick for him, and had already written and been refused;) when temptation after temptation was held out, and still the Croft gates remained shut, then the primary enthusiasm lost something of its early savour, and finally toned down into bitterness and disappointment.

Some indeed went so far as to call him proud and disagreeable ; and Miss Campbell, talking confidentially to Harry Grant who was rather a pet of hers and often at their house, pronounced him “scarcely good-looking—certainly not handsome—with that thin, puckered face of his, and eyes so sunk in the back of his head you could scarcely see them !”—at which cried out the little minx Ellen of fourteen—and a pretty little coquettish minx she was, too !—“Handsome ! why, he looks made of parchment, and as old as the Wandering Jew.”

‘But her elder sister told her to hold her

tongue and not talk of things she did not understand.

The Misses Price openly “lamented his manifest unsoundness ;” and Mr. Bennet whispered everywhere his one word, “atheist,” which balanced Mr. Grainger’s “swindler.”

But when the Escotts gave a dinner—which they did expressly for him, and as soon as Mr. Escott returned from his yearly visit to his maiden sister living down in Huntingdonshire—he accepted that invitation without difficulty, and made himself signally agreeable ; at least, to Aura. It can scarcely be said perhaps to any other, for he did not exchange half-a-dozen words with any one save his hosts and their daughter. Mrs. Escott did not know whether to feel flattered or frightened at this preference ; yet, even if flattered as a mother, she certainly was frightened with reference to the Vale people, and especially frightened of Mrs. Price, whose manners got harder and more glacial as the evening wore on, till at last she seemed as if she would stiffen into ice altogether, as she sat bolt upright in her easy-chair looking

sternly at Aura and Mr. Trelawney from the severe nimbus of her widow's cap.

As for Aura, naughty girl! her coolness in what Mrs. Escott called her "trying position" was amazing. She spoke and laughed to Mr. Trelawney with as much unconcern as if he had been only Harry Grant, and not the owner of Croft—the polestar by which all courses were set; she was not fluttered, nor embarrassed, nor shy, nor excited, nothing in fact but her usual self; and except that her soft grey eyes were darker and brighter than in general, and that her cheeks were very slightly flushed, and her manners a shade more animated—though they were always animated—no one could have seen that she took more interest in Mr. Trelawney's conversation than she did in Major Morgan's prosy tales of how he used to kill the tigers in the days of his darkness and before he had got converted. She certainly looked very beautiful, and she seemed to be enjoying herself; but that was all.

The Rectory was a good deal discussed after this, and Aura, never thoroughly popular, came

in for her full share of the comments. "It was very clear what was intended," said Mrs. Price, indignantly; "only it was a pity that the Escotts should play their game so openly. As for Aura, she, Mrs. Price, never had much opinion of her, and now less than ever."

Miss Mason, branching off into a side thought, was quite warm on the disadvantage of immaturity, and the excellence of a womanhood fully ripened. But as Aura was twenty-one last birthday, she was not quite so immature as Miss Mason's indignation would have made her. Indeed others affected to consider her quite *passée*, and even sunny-tempered Lotty Campbell, herself past nineteen, always spoke of her as "waning," and had the rather funny habit of "asking her advice on things" as if there had been a couple of dozen years at the very least between them. Aunt Dess was the only one who did not join in the cry going through Vale against her; but then Aunt Dess had one of those profound natures sometimes seen in very timid and reticent people, and judged for herself in the matter of Aura Escott at all events,

however much she might be led by public opinion about other things. She loved that royal-hearted beautiful girl, and thought her the noblest creature under heaven ; and when people came to her with their small slanders, and petty scraps of spite, she used to answer quietly : “ It may be so, but it would take far more than this to make me think lightly of Aura Escott ;” which made them say that she was besotted and stupid, and that Aura had turned her head with flattery.

Her quiet faith and loyalty were sorely tried just now, for Mr. Trelawney soon began to see a great deal of the Escotts ; and, singling out this one house alone of all in the Vale, was an invidious distinction that brought honour to no one ; least of all to Aura, who was getting almost as much spoken against as if she had been convicted of a crime, and who was not handled the more gently by the Valeites because of her indifference to their treatment. She had always been rather too indifferent to public opinion to please them ; she took her own way too decidedly, thought too freely, acted too independently, held herself too much

aloof from the current gossip of the place (always an affront to the gossippers), and showed too distinctly that she lived a life of her own which none of them touched, and into the hidden sweetness of which not one of them entered, to suit people as shallow and exogenous as they were. For all which causes she was unpopular with most of them, and when it became evident that her star was in the ascendant at Croft it sank proportionately with the Vale.

CHAPTER II.

MR. TRELAWNEY's friendship with the Escotts—perhaps it would be more correct to say with Aura, for he troubled himself very little about the old people, and cut his courtesy rather short when he was forced into direct intercourse with them—was one of those which receive no check from the beginning, therefore early ripen into maturity. There was sufficient reason for it in the children, if the world wanted a reason ; for Aura soon became as fond of them as if they had been—her brother's, she said ; and insensibly assumed a tone of loving direction which made her of supreme importance in their young lives ; thus supplying some of the deficiencies of Miss Bond, the governess, a weak-minded, good-natured young

person with white eyelashes and rudimentary eyebrows, who curled up one side and said, "Yes, ma'am," when she was spoken to, and who went about in badly fitting black jackets and knitted scarlet woollen sleeves. Who went about, moreover, in mortal fear of her haughty employer, whom she inwardly likened to Rochester or Paul Ferrol, Childe Harold, the Corsair, or any other tall, dark, imperious, and mysterious gentleman of romance, with a little gentle wonder superadded as to whether he ever thought of her as the Jane Eyre or Medora corresponding. But these were mere dreams ; the waking reality was one of intense moral and almost bodily fear.

And indeed Mr. Trelawney was not quite the kind of man calculated to reassure a nervous young woman, for, as Mr. Patrick Grainger used to say : "A haughtier and more unpleasant-mannered person he had never seen ; and he had seen something of the world too." It was chiefly for the good of the children then, that Mr. Trelawney went so often to the Rectory, and talked so long and exclusively to Aura ? "She had a singularly

effective manner with them," he said, "and seemed to impress them as by a superior influence; as indeed she was to all who knew her," he once added, a sweet smile brightening over his stern face like sunlight across a dark lake, and such a depth of tenderness in those cavernous eyes of his that made Aura's face all aflame. For Jasper Trelawney, haughty and unpleasant as he was in general manner, could be as tender as a woman when he pleased; as Aura Escott knew; but as she alone of all the Clive Vale world did know. To the rest he was of ice when he was not of granite. Whereupon it came to be a recognised thing between them, that the intercourse which was now so frequent that the whole Vale winked and blinked its prophecies, was founded solely on the benefit which his young children derived from Miss Escott's society. And Aura, for her part, believed that it was simply womanly pity for the motherless children miles away in the woods gathering primroses and wild flowers and vexing Miss Bond's kind soul by tumbling into ditches and tearing themselves with thorns, which set her

heart throbbing so that sometimes she could scarcely speak, when the tall, dark, lordly Master of Croft came striding up the gravel walk with that air of universal proprietorship and indisputable supremacy which some men possess, and which has such an inexpressible charm to women when it is genuine, and seems to be allowable by their circumstances.

Still, Aura herself counted for something in this friendship. Mr. Trelawney brought her new books to read, of rather different quality to those patronised by the book-club and Mr. Bennet; he helped her with her German, and gave her lessons in Italian; he lent her sketches and photographs, and small models fresh from Italy and Munich, to study; he played the flute to the accompaniment of her pianoforte—supplying the music—which was not the ordinary music of the Clive Vale young ladies, and, it is only right to add, decidedly unpopular with them all; and when they were tired of the instruments alone, he put in a bass to her rich contralto, and the two voices harmonised marvellously, though Mrs.

Escott said, "They made her head ache; they were so low and growling;" he gave her instructions in the management of her greenhouse, which had been papa's gift to her when "she came of age two months ago," and stocked it with rare ferns and orchids from his own; and in short, he made himself the centre of her intellectual life, and the source whence, somehow she scarcely knew how, flowed all her pleasure. Which helped to the blinding of her eyes for a few months longer, as it took her thoughts from self-examination and directed them to outward circumstances quite sufficiently distinct to account for all. The children, books, art, and music—surely reasons enough why Mr. Trelawney should come to the house almost daily, and she be so strangely happy when he did come! Aura was not the first girl who has accepted love for friendship, and will not be the last.

There was much that was noticeable in Mr. Trelawney and but little that was commonplace. He was a man of reading and extensive travel, accomplished and of wide general information;

not a learned man or a scientific one, not deep in any branch of knowledge, but thoroughly well-informed on all ; a man of strong will, intense pride, and almost passionate haughtiness, yet sensitive as a woman in certain matters touching his honour ; and above all, he was a man of silence and reserve. No one knew anything about him—whence he came, who were his connections, where he had formerly lived, or what had been his previous life. No one ever heard him mention a place of residence in England, though he would talk freely of his travels, and speak of his adventures and experiences in the south and east ; and no record of his dead wife seemed to exist. No portrait of her, no book bearing her name or her writing, no small memento such as other people have to keep alive the dear name in the hearts of the little ones, no locket, ring of hair, work-box, or pretty womanly trifle, and no allusion, direct or indirect, to her, gave the Vale the faintest clue to this part of his history. It was all a dead letter to them ; a cypher to which they had not the key.

Neither Miss Bond nor the old housekeeper

knew more than the rest; for they had both been engaged in London just before coming to the Vale, when the gentleman and the young ladies were staying at an hotel, and their only private servant was a Frenchwoman who had left before they arrived; so that no questioning could get much information from them, and their blank ignorance but served to make the general curiosity greater. The children, too, were of no help; for the not very explanatory answer which Zillah Price got from Julia the elder, and “just five” she said when she came to the Vale, when under colour of sponge-cake and the microscope she questioned that innocent little lady closely, was: “We never had a mamma, and I don’t know where I was born.” To ask anything of Mabel, aged four, was of course time lost with a vengeance; so the mystery of the former Mrs. Trelawney—if silence is necessarily mystery—was for the present obliged to be borne.

Aura was the first to know that this silence did include a mystery, and that Mr. Trelawney had endured some wrong, or blighting sorrow at the hands of his late wife; for once, quite early

in their acquaintance, she alluded to the children's mother in a manner so natural she could not have avoided it without affectation ; and there was no cause, then, for any one to suspect that the subject would be unwelcome ; but he, as if eager to seize the flimsiest occasion even, peremptorily forbade her to mention that name again to him or to the children, adding in Julia's words, and with infinite harshness of manner,—

“ They never had a mother, Miss Escott ! ”

Aura never repeated this to living ears, be very sure. She was no gossip even about persons she did not like, but she would have suffered much before she would have breathed a word likely in any way to harm one whom she called her “ friend.” Still, in spite of her silence and the general ignorance, the fact of something uncomfortable and undeclared about the late Mrs. Trelawney crept out, as these things do creep out, no one knows how ; and when the new comer had been about three months at Croft, the Whisper began.

When the Vale got scent of a mystery they

hunted it gallantly; it was their way, and the prime amusement of their lives; and soon all sorts of rumours were afloat, springing up like mushrooms in a night no one knew from what seeds but all could see to what poisonous out-growth. Some said there had never been a Mrs. Trelawney; others, that she was not dead but divorced; others, that she was not divorced but only separated, and Miss Escott had better mind what she was about, else she might find herself in a fine mess some of these bright days; others, that she was in a madhouse whither his ill-treatment had sent her; and some, that she was in a madhouse indeed, but as sane as any of the Clive Vale people themselves at this moment: (this last report was traced back to its foundation by Mr. Patrick Grainger, who saw in its substantiation much pleasant excitement with the proud consciousness of rescuing an innocent lady; but when he ran it to earth he found it had originated with old Miss Mason, who had simply “supposed” such a case to Sara Price, and Miss Sara in repeating it forgot the supposition). Then again, some said she had been

a lady of high birth with whom he had eloped, but who had been found and forced back by her friends —with the addition of a husband in some versions; others, a woman of low birth whom he had married in a moment of intoxication and had left when sobered; many declared the children were not his, but his elder brother's now deceased, and he was keeping them out of their property like the uncle in the “Babes in the Wood” :—“ Oh ! they knew all about it ; Mr. Mountain had friends down in Cornwall who knew a Mr. Withiell Tre-lawney there, and he had just died and left some children and a brother, and no doubt this was the same ; for Jasper and Withiell were both uncommon names, and were very like brothers' names.” Some even looked askance at poor white-eyed, uncomfortable Miss Bond ; and a few, more insane and imaginative than the rest, spoke of queens and empresses and prima donnas and lady duchesses, and affected to find undeniable likenesses to certain photographs in the two foreign-looking little girls, who wore their hair combed back and such very short frocks, and spoke

English with a foreign accent, stumbling over the th's, and making all the i's into e's, while guiding themselves by a grammar which assuredly was not Murray's. Nothing died for want of repetition and enlargement, and not a week had passed since the first rumour was set afloat before every one in the district had a different version, and all, exclusive information.

Mr. Patrick Grainger chuckled openly at the gathering cloud. "Had he not foretold something wrong from the first? Why had he not been believed? Was his long experience of the world, and his knowledge of men and manners, to be despised as if he was a mere clodhopper who had never been beyond his native vale? Mr. Trelawney knew very well what people he had to deal with; and do you think he did not see who could detect him, and who could not? Else why," he asked them with some emphasis, "why was he, Mr. Grainger, so persistently refused admittance into Croft; and why had he been singled out of all in the Vale for Mr. Trelawney's most decided insolence?"

It was nothing of the kind, but that did not matter ; and as for being refused admittance into Croft, that meant he had called once when Mr. Trelawney was at the county town, ten miles off, and he chose not to believe the man when he said “Master was not at home,” but to take the refusal as a personal slight to himself. You see it is sometimes as bright a feather in one’s cap to be singled out for marked disfavour, as it is to be specially favoured. It shows that we are somebody, at all events ; and next to the love of the lofty stands the fear of the crafty in the long and varied scale of flattery. As matters were, Mr. Patrick Grainger would rather have had it to say that the Master of Croft was insolent to him because he was afraid of him and knew his power of penetration, than that he had chosen him for his bosom friend from the beginning because he thought he could deceive him. His own share in the business ended by his “going up to London to inquire about this Mr. Trelawney,” though where he went to inquire, or what he did when he did inquire, no one ever knew. As he had not the

faintest “spoor” by which to track his game, it was rather a wide search and a cold scent. He never said much about it to the Clive Vale people, contenting himself with remarking in a mysterious kind of manner, “I made every possible inquiry about him, but I could get very little information ; and nothing to his credit, I can promise you.”

The Misses Price and their mamma, whom Mr. Trelawney seemed to take a cruel pleasure in affronting, were nearly as forward as Mr. Grainger in demonstrating the existence and defining the shape and substance of this gathering cloud ; and Mr. Bennet helped them ; adding certain amazing conjectures of his own, which, as is sometimes the case with scandalmongers with short memories, he presently forgot were his own, and detailed to a gaping audience as “facts which had come to his knowledge, he was not at liberty to say how.” He even went so far as to warn the Escotts against an intimacy “which, to say the least of it, he sadly feared was damaging their usefulness in the parish more than they were aware of.” And then, warming with his subject, he went on to use terms while

speaking of Mr. Trelawney that would have been more wrathful than righteous had the question been of a ticket-of-leave man in disguise.

Aura would not submit to this. While her father temporised, and said: “Pooh! pooh! my dear sir, it is not so bad as that!” or, “gently, gently, Mr. Bennet; *audi alteram partem*,” and her mother chimed in with the curate as she did with every outside speaker no matter who, the daughter flamed up into a wrath that was quite as righteous, and a great deal more intense than even Mr. Bennet’s; and disdainfully casting at him certain texts on charity, which I am afraid had not much of the spirit of charity in them towards her adversary, she hurled back his suspicions with such vigour, that the tinkling cymbal of peace between them cracked—and it had of late been a very tinkling cymbal indeed—and a fiery feud set in between the curate and the rector’s daughter which never cooled down to Christian temperature again.

Mr. Escott, though a little startled at his daughter’s warmth, was “not sorry she had

given it to that young jackanapes as he deserved." This he said to his loving spouse in secret; but the mother was very indignant, and all but ordered her daughter out of the room. If she had been sure that she would have gone she would have done so. The Rectory however, thus influenced, held firm; the good-hearted if obtuse old master there being too mindful of his office not to suspend judgment until proof could be brought; and as Mrs. Escott rather liked than not the position of holding with the hare and hunting with the hounds, which gave her a view of both fields, they still visited at Croft and received Mr. Trelawney's visits as cordially as ever; while the malcontents came daily to the house to detail the latest scandals and the newest lies.

They soon left off detailing them to Aura though; for she was an uncompromising partisan who would admit of no flaws in her friends; but, save the Campbell girls who were too good-natured to be scoundrels, and who besides admired the Master of Croft not a little after their

own fashion, she could exchange very few words with any one now, for the whole place was ringing with Mr. Trelawney and his Mystery, and no one could talk of anything else. Even Aunt Dess—gentle “aunty” as little Hannah called her—was infected with the general belief; and though she loved Aura too much to hurt her by the turn of a hair, and so never spoke of Mr. Trelawney to her at all, yet even she believed that he was a kind of nineteenth-century Blue Beard with a private Horror of his own undiscovered yet by any Clive Vale Fatima.

Meanwhile Mr. Trelawney seemed loftily unconscious of any hitch in the social machinery; and walked about with the superb air natural to him—looking as if the Croft grounds included every superficial acre on the earth’s crust, and as if the whole human family was of a different zoological class to himself. And yet he knew it all; more than one in the Vale could swear to that, for more than one had sent him full accounts in certain letters without signatures which pass by the name of anonymous. Mr. Grainger had done so; so had

Mr. Bennet ; Mrs. Price would also but she was afraid ; and more than one of the lower people ; but he walked about just as loftily as ever—and if anything a little more loftily. Nothing moved him, and no one had the power to vex nor yet to please ; always excepting Aura ; and so he went on living his own life of reserve and haughtiness and social isolation as if no such poisons as slander and gossip ever circulated through the veins of English society to kill friendships and reputations as autumn blights kill summer flowers. And in the whole of the Vale he had only two friends — Aura Escott, whose advocacy rather damaged him than otherwise (it certainly damaged herself), and Harry Grant, whom he scarcely knew by sight and who got laughed at for being “ bitten just like a raw country boy.”

CHAPTER III.



THROUGH the corn-fields silently walked Aura Escott and Jasper Trelawney — the children running hand-in-hand before them. Something in these later days had risen up between them which had chilled their actions and restricted their words ; and though nothing overt had been said or done by either, yet each felt that the old boundary lines were broken up, and neither knew yet what would be the setting of the new. On Aura's side a bashful consciousness tinged her manners, usually so self-possessed and quiet, with that tender bloom of love unspoken and unassured which makes the dearest grace of womanhood. If she met Jasper's eyes she blushed and her heart beat with strange violence ; if she spoke to him

her own eyes dropped and did not fix themselves in the frank and open manner of past days ; her words did not come so readily as they used ; her voice was deeper in tone and not so smooth in inflection—at times indeed she stammered, and constantly lost her thread ; and her lips were more tremulous and mobile ; while he was courteous even to formality, and on some days as cold and distant as if she had offended him. He had lately, too, discarded all the little intimacies which had sprung up between them ; books were still lent but no more leaves turned down or passages pencilled at the margin ; songs were still sung but with less expression and of less special meaning : morning calls were made but less frequently and more fitfully, and the conversation, once addressed exclusively to Aura, now almost as entirely passed her by. Yet the face that turned to hers with a kind of haunting longing was more tender than ever, if feverish and troubled, and the hand which pressed hers at parting pressed it with the lingering touch of a love that could not be concealed and would not be denied. Again, another change.

Hitherto in their walks Aura had taken Mr. Trelawney's arm ; a grace she never granted to any one else, nor he offered ; but to-day he simply walked free by her side, and thrust his hand into his breast.

Aura was not hurt at all this, nor did she call that coldness which merely expressed constraint. How indeed could she think it coldness when his softened voice faltered as he spoke to her ? when his hand trembled if he touched her ? and his cheek turned pale as he looked down into her face, straightly, sadly, tenderly, as men do look who love and do not yet dare to hope ? There was no coldness in all this ; and beyond this she saw nothing.

The setting sun was shining bright and level over the cornfield, burning the scarlet poppies with a warmer fire and gilding the golden grain with a richer burnish. The deep blue cornflower looked like a royal badge in the slanting sunshine, the large white ox-eye was like a woman's stately beauty, and the dusky cranesbill splashed the green and gold of ear and halm with spots of

purple blood ; the sun was low, set in a cloudless glory of yellow light, while far up in the heavens a sheaf of light-edged crimson clouds flashed out against the sky like creatures waiting for the last look of the Beloved. Against the west everything was flooded with liquid gold, so that all colours melted into the subtle atmosphere, and individual forms were lost in the quivering haze that softened the distant hills into cloud-like gates opening direct into heaven, and set the burning trees like warders on the way ; but to the east, the palest tint of flower or stone was brought out in such intensity of colour as art could never hope to express, while every faintest marking in the landscape was as distinct as if photographed against the purple sky. It was an evening made for love—but love of the higher and purer sort ; an evening when the baser passions are enchained and set at rest, and the nobler and holier impulses waken up in their stead.

The silence between the two walking so slowly through the corn was long and unbroken, yet it seemed full of speech to both, as if they had

been talking earnestly together. Who does not know the eloquence of silence and the love which makes itself felt in the voiceless stillness? However sweet the moment of open confession may be, that tender prelude of silence is sweeter still!

At last Jasper spoke, as men often do when they have grave things at heart, far from the main point of his thought—

“They are a great care,” he said, pointing to the children as they ran along the narrow path, overtopped by the corn so that only their white frocks were seen gleaming through the golden stalks: “a weighty responsibility and a dangerous charge. I feel unequal to it, for a man’s nature has so little that is in harmony with a child’s; it is only women who understand children.”

“That is true,” said Aura gently.

“And pitiable as well as true; is it not?”

“Yes; one scarcely knows which to feel for most, the child or the man,” returned Aura, fetching her breath. She found conversation difficult this glorious summer evening.

Jasper bent to look into her face, but her veil

had fallen half over it so that he could not see what colour was on her cheek, nor what expression rested in her eyes.

“It is pleasant to be pitied by Miss Escott,” he then said, his voice low and slightly tremulous, but with a rich undertone in it not always there ; “for though you might not have been speaking of me intentionally, the phrase would suit me ; and you would not recall it ?” he added, in a still lower tone ; “you would not shut out me alone of all your world from the gracious boon of your sympathy ?”

“No,” said Aura, “I would not.”

“I am, however, more fortunate than most lone fathers,” he continued, after a short pause. “Your advice has been of so much value to me with my poor little ones, that I do not feel as lonely and without nursery compass as I did before I knew you ; for one of your many gracious gifts, Miss Escott, is the power of managing and understanding children—a gift without which not the loveliest woman in the world is a true woman to my eyes.”

"I am glad that I am of any use to you," returned Aura timidly; "but you overstate my value."

"And if I do not think so?" and he laid his hand gently on her shoulder. "If I do not think so?" he said again.

"Then you are kinder than I deserve," she answered confusedly, her senses too much disturbed to serve her.

"You do not wish to lessen your value to me?" He drew quite close to her as he spoke.

"No," said Aura slowly, as if with difficulty; "you may always command such help as I can give."

"Do you mean these words in their full integrity, Miss Escott? May I understand them to promise all they can be made to imply?" And again he bent down to look into her face.

This time the veil had fully fallen, and the brim of her hat shaded both brow and eyes. He raised the veil and with gentle violence forced her to turn towards him. The action was a caress in itself, and Aura's cheeks burnt like fire as she

glanced up once timidly and shyly, afraid to trust herself, then turned with the sweet hypocrisy of shamed love to where the children stood waiting for them, as if solicitous chiefly for them. Perhaps the blanched face watching hers as closely as a man might watch the face of his doom—the compressed lips barring down impetuous words—the dark eyes, imperious and pleading at once—the quivering muscles—the lines full of pain and anxious wishes, full too of self-restraint and fear—perhaps such a tempest as she saw beneath the iron bondage of pride and doubt and silence terrified her, as it might have terrified any woman who had never assisted at the tragedies of human passion, and never known the suffering lying in the doubt of love: be that as it may, she turned away her head, not answering; but she left her hand where he had clasped it, her fingers closed over his, and the pressure of his not unreturned.

“Why do you not speak to me, Aura?” he then said, very gently, drawing her so close to him that his breath passed over her face. “Will you not answer me?”

She bent towards him with a clinging kind of gesture, laying her other hand on both of his holding hers to his breast; but she could not speak, and she dared not look at him. She only came nearer to him, and clasped his hands with a tender little pressure, half ashamed half beseeching.

“ Could you dare, perhaps, great sorrow—perhaps,” and here his voice deepened, “ great disgrace for love, Aura? Could you throw your life into the lot and heritage of another, and ask nothing but to be loved in return? Though thorns grew thick about your path, could you tread them down by love, and could a home, where you would be the angel, stand you in stead of the envious admiration of crowds? Could it indeed stand you in stead of all else, if the gulf opened at your feet, and separated you from all but love and home? Answer me, Aura, quietly and from your heart, as you would answer an Eternal Fate; for your fate and mine are in your hands to-day. But answer according to your strength, and promise nothing beyond what you could fulfil. I

shall not love you less, Aura, for your truth, and I shall respect you the more for your candour."

Aura trembled violently, and for a moment seemed sinking with the weight of the heavy love upon her; but only for a moment; then the nervous flutter stilled; the passionate flush faded to a marble paleness; the shamefaced girlish emotion that only feels and does not think, passed into the calmness of a woman's strength; and raising her eyes with something that was as much religion in them as love, she answered slowly,—

"Yes, I could bear both shame and sorrow for love, and be thankful that I had been chosen."

No more was needed. Jasper caught her to his heart, and in the golden light of the setting sun, and standing between the rows of yellowing corn, the kiss that was their lifelong bond was given; and when the children, impatient at their long delay, came running back to ask why they waited, their father told them to put their arms round Aura's neck and kiss her, for she was now their mother. And as she knelt to take

them to her—and with what a fulness of maternal love she held them to her bosom and encircled them in her arms!—still, half kneeling, she took Jasper's hand in hers, and in a Ruth-like reverential manner pressed it to her lips—love doing homage to love!

To the end of Jasper's life that picture never faded from his memory:—the liquid sunset and the yellowing corn; the woman, half kneeling by his side with the sunshine tinging her bright brown hair to darkened gold, and the children hanging caressingly around her—maid, wife, and mother in one—looking up into his face with a love in her own that almost transfigured it, while taking his hand and carrying it to her lips with that mingling of tenderness and reverence, ennobled by her own dignity, which is the most precious expression of love a man can receive. And the rarest. For womanly strength is sometimes afraid of loving submission even to the stronger and the nobler; and womanly weakness too often arrogates to itself exclusive privileges, and demands the homage it will not pay in return.

For one blessed night only was the secret kept between the lovers. The next day Mr. Trelawney called at the Rectory ; and, after a hurried word with Aura whom he met in the garden, went straight to Mr. Escott's study to confess and demand. He found that worthy man apoplectic and somnolent, breathing hard and dozing, as he laboured to patch together two sermons of ancient date and somewhat diverse views, that he might escape the weekly task of composition so irksome to elderly parish priests of much flesh and sleepy habits.

“ Ah, Mr. Trelawney ! you here ? And what may bring you so early afield to-day ? ” said the Rector, bustling about and making a great show of wakefulness. “ Come, sit down, sit down, and let us hear all about it ; how the world uses you and how you use it.” And he held out two fat fingers and a spatulous thumb—his ordinary mode of greeting his friends.

Mr. Trelawney shook his hand in his usual way, neither more cordially nor more nervously, and took the chair indicated with his customary

air of universal proprietorship and supremacy ; his pale face just as calm as ever—as stern some people would have called it—and his manners showing neither haste nor emotion. No one would have said that there sat a man come to ask a father for his daughter, and throwing more than life upon the issue. He was more like a man coming to pronounce a judgment and to claim his right.

“ I have come to speak with you on an important subject, Mr. Escott,” he began, one hand thrust into his bosom—a favourite action of his—the other clenched and resting on the table.

“ Glad to hear I can be of any use to you, my dear sir,” returned Mr. Escott, fussily. “ Most people come to consult me on their important matters. I am a kind of Protestant father confessor to my flock ; an innocuous one, let us hope ; he ! he ! he ! for I have no very great respect for those gentleman in general.”

“ Nor I,” said Mr. Trelawney quietly. “ The soul which cannot stand firm without extra-

neous aid, is scarcely likely to walk straight with it."

"Exactly my opinion, Mr. Trelawney, only more tersely expressed," cried the Rector, who had a schoolman's love for what he used to call "epigrammatic condensation." "So, in more homely words, my dear sir, I say to my parishioners when they hang too much on my advice. No offence to you you know; *our* discussion will not fall under the same head as Betsy Brown's or Sarah Smith's."

"Not exactly," said Mr. Trelawney, a faint smile relaxing his tightly-pressed lips; "my business concerns yourself as much as it concerns me, which I fancy is not often the case with your consulting parishioners."

"Concerns me?" cried the Rector opening his eyes; "your business concerns me? You puzzle me, my good sir! What can I have to do with your affairs? what, indeed?"

"Only through your daughter, Mr. Escott."

"Through Aura?" he exclaimed. "I hope my daughter has been the source of no uneasiness

to you, Mr. Trelawney? I hope there has been no disagreement, no quarrel, eh? Aura is a trifle self-willed, I believe; not that she is ever undutiful to me, dear child, or what the strictest parent would wish bettered; but they say that she speaks her mind too plainly at times, and so offends unwittingly. But she is a child, my dear sir, a mere child, and you must forgive her, eh?"

"There has been no disagreement or quarrel," said Jasper very quietly. "On the contrary, I love your daughter, and wish to marry her."

"Marry her! Good God, sir! impossible!" cried the Rector flinging up his hands. "Impossible! absurd! preposterous! Aura is a child, quite a child yet, and would not think of leaving her mother—would not dream of it!"

"Miss Escott is twenty-one—not quite a child, you see—and not unwilling, so she says, to be my wife," replied Jasper in a steady voice, a little hard.

"God bless my soul! then you have spoken to her already! Mr. Trelawney, sir, you have acted ill, treacherously, and basely; you have

abused my confidence and hospitality; you have stolen my child from me under the false colour of friendship; you have not acted like a man of honour, you have not, sir!—not like a gentleman nor a Christian!"

Here the Rector gasped for breath, rising from his chair and wandering helplessly about the room, wiping his face with his crimson and yellow silk pocket-handkerchief.

"I am sorry to see you so much agitated and distressed, Mr. Escott," said Mr. Trelawney gravely; "and for the sake of your agitation I pass over words which else, as a gentleman, I must have resented."

"You cannot justify yourself, sir; you know you cannot!" cried Mr. Escott petulantly. "My words are not too strong for the occasion; every father would support me, both in my denunciations and lamentations."

"I never justify myself to any one," answered Jasper haughtily, "nor shall I do so now. Yet it would seem to me——no! hear me, Mr. Escott; I have a right to be heard," he said, lowering his

voice to a deep, bell-like tone ; for Mr. Escott was breaking out into a peevish “ Pshaw ! don’t talk so to me ! ” and Jasper felt that now had come the moment when he must exert his own strength and crush definitely the poor old gentleman’s feebleness—“ it would seem to me, I say, the most honourable, as it is certainly the most rational, thing to do, to speak directly with the woman one wishes to make one’s wife. The times have passed when parents could dispose of their daughters’ hands at their pleasure ; and, so far as I myself am concerned, my wife must be one whose individuality is too large for any sponsorship—even that of a father—to be possible. I ask your consent to our marriage : I could not ask your permission to love your daughter, nor could your prohibition have prevented her love for me. Look back, Mr. Escott ; did you ask your young wife’s father for leave to love, or did you love first without leave ? And human hearts have grown no tamer and no more obedient to law than when you gave yours without authority or licence.”

“ But it is so very unexpected ! ” said Mr. Escott, a little staggered by Jasper’s words, which went deeper than the speaker knew of ; for Mr. Escott’s had been a clandestine marriage, and his wife’s father had never forgiven him—not even on his death-bed. But Jasper had spoken at random, knowing nothing of this. “ I am quite taken by surprise,” he continued petulantly ; “ you really must give me time to reflect ; one cannot decide on so important a question without consideration ! ”

“ It is unfortunate that it has come upon you so much by surprise,” returned Jasper imper-
turbably. “ I should have thought my intentions could have been no secret to you by this time ; I imagined I had expressed them as plainly as most men do before the last words are spoken.”

“ Bless my soul, sir ! I knew nothing of your intentions, and never thought you had any intentions at all,” said the Rector. “ You came and went as you liked, and as others had done before you ; mind that !—for when my boy Herbert was at home we had no end of young men about the

place, and yet they never ended in any intentions, as you call them. You were very civil and attentive and all that to Aura, as was only natural; and I did not thwart her—one does not thwart an only daughter. But, bless my heart, who would ever have expected this with a man of your age! I am sure I did not, I can tell you, else you should not have found things quite so easy: and if you did not deign to ask my permission to love my daughter you should have found the opportunity rather more difficult," he muttered.

Mr. Trelawney bowed.

"I regret that I was not more explicit," he said; "but I trust that in spite of my mistake, and your misunderstanding, no opposition will be offered me now?"

He spoke quite calmly, but in his own special overmastering manner against which the poor Rector could never stand up, and which reduced him at all times to the most helpless impotence with Mr. Trelawney.

"I don't know that, sir! I don't know that at all," he stammered. "You have not been here

long, and we have had no means given us of knowing anything about you. I don't say but that you are quite a worthy man—a gentleman and all that—but my only daughter—quite unsophisticated—and you a virtual stranger. I don't know about my consent, even though things have gone so cruelly far!"

"I respect your cautiousness, Mr. Escott; I would have respected it had it extended even to the total exclusion of me and mine from the Rectory. I came here, as you say, a total stranger, without introduction and seeking none; and I should not have thought it strange if the society of Clive Vale had refused to recognize me. But having been recognized—and remember by no seeking of my own!—here is the result. And it is just the result from which there is no escaping: for we cannot go back in life, Mr. Escott! And now what references shall I give you?—my banker's or my doctor's? The one I think will guarantee my solvency, the other my constitution. Of my moral character, and of my fitness to bear the name of gentleman, I can offer no guarantee,

save what I may have earned for myself during my residence among you. Let us understand each other fully; do you need sureties for these, or can you take my integrity and honour on trust?"

There was something in Mr. Trelawney's air and manner that was more and more subduing (not convincing) the Rector. Perhaps it was the calm will in opposition to the looseness of his own nerveless mind; the direct step of the one marching straight to his point, no matter over what obstacle, and the vague wandering of the other, with no more compact principle of life than a slipshod kind of constitutional benevolence, and no higher aim than that of keeping peace with all men; perhaps it was his height—that towering six feet of iron sinews—perhaps it was his eyes, that held him as the Ancient Mariner held the wedding guest, with a hard and stubborn power; whatever it was, the Master of Croft conquered him, and the words which rose to his lips concerning the unfavourable reports afloat died before utterance. Besides,

though Mr. Escott was not remarkable for logic, the thought flashed across him that Mr. Trelawney might justly object to any stress being laid on these reports now, for if he had not credited them when first made why should he do so now? Nothing was changed. If he had received the Master of Croft on friendly terms after he had heard them, how could he pretend indignation and suspicion because certain consequences had arrived? He dreaded his guest's unsparing comments too much to be frank; and so the moment for telling Mr. Trelawney that the Clive Vale world suspected him of a mystery if of nothing worse passed; and with it Mr. Escott's only rational objection to the marriage.

“At least let me speak to Mrs. Escott!” he pleaded piteously—for was it not a matter for self-pity that he dared neither oppose nor deny? Do we not all writhe in our cleft sticks? “It is but a mother’s privilege, and her right. You really must concede me that.”

“Willingly, my dear sir; it is her right, as you say; let us go at once.”

“I would rather see her alone, Mr. Trelawney. It would be more considerate, more respectful,” said Mr. Escott helplessly; “and it will break the shock to her better. You can come when we have talked a little together, but I must go first, with your permission.”

“I am sorry to differ from you again, Mr. Escott; but, contrary to your opinion, I think it would be more respectful if I were to accompany you, and ask her openly the question I have asked of you. There can be no mistake then, and I shall be at hand to answer any objections that may occur to Mrs. Escott, or to explain any difficulties. You agree with me I am sure; and I am ready to accompany you.”

He took up his hat as he spoke, standing in an attitude of expectation.

Mr. Escott almost groaned, “Oh dear, oh dear! where will all this end?” he said peevishly, shuffling uneasily through the room.

“Shall we go?” again asked Mr. Trelawney, standing by the opened door, which he held in his hand. “I am at your service.”

And they left the room—the poor, fat, easy-tempered Rector almost in tears of vexation.

They found Mrs. Escott in the drawing-room, knitting a long strip of white woollen. No one but Aura and the old woman of the village ever knew for what purpose those strips were made ; but she spent great part of her life in knitting them, and thought an unbroken supply of soft garters both useful and philanthropic. She saw that something unusual had happened ; and, before a word was spoken, became fluttered and crimsoned, not bidding Mr. Trelawney good-morning as cordially as usual,—but this from confusion rather than from ill-will.

“ Mr. Trelawney, my dear, has called to speak to us on very important business,” began Mr. Escott, rubbing his hands nervously over each other.

“ Indeed ! ” said Mrs. Escott. “ Can he have heard what Zillah Price and I were talking of the other evening ? ” she thought, disturbed ; for she and Zillah had been canvassing the Master of Croft not a little severely, and she was afraid

that Miss Zillah might have turned traitor. To be sure she had praised him not ten minutes after to Harry Grant, who admired him ; so that might be pleaded as a set-off, she thought.

“I have come, Mrs. Escott,” began Mr. Trelawney, “to ask a great boon—an unspeakable favour.”

“Ask a favour of me, Mr. Trelawney!” said Mrs. Escott, in wonder. “Bless me! what can the man mean? I hope he don’t want money,” she added mentally, dropping half-a-dozen stitches. “You surprise me,” she then said aloud. “A favour from us to Mr. Trelawney seems impossible,” very stiffly—just to show him that this kind of thing would not do.

“You will not say so when you have heard my errand, Mrs. Escott. I have come to ask you for the hand of your daughter Aura, and I trust that the alliance may not be displeasing to you.”

To all outward appearances it should not be. Rich, well bred, well educated, of no known unpleasant habits, and the finest and most distin-

guished-looking man for miles round—what was there in the proposal to make Mrs. Escott frown and grow red, and dart angry glances at her husband, and turn only her shoulder to her son-in-law expectant? She could not put her objections into words, as she said afterwards when it was needful to defend herself for her consent too hastily given; but she had them, though Mr. Trelawney agitated her so much at the time by his looks and manners that she forgot everything; which was true; for she too was forced into submission by the subtle magnetism of the stronger will.

“Aura must judge for herself,” she then said sullenly, angry at the way in which they were both overawed and controlled.

“I believe I may say that Miss Escott has judged for herself already,” said Mr. Trelawney. “If you have no further objection, the question is settled, my dear madam.” He drew on his gloves.

The father and mother looked at each other, and Mrs. Escott began to cry.

“She is very undutiful and unfeeling not to have spoken to me first, and I do not like the marriage at all—that I don’t!” she cried, sobbing.

“Your objection, Mrs. Escott?” asked Mr. Trelawney.

Mrs. Escott still sobbed.

“We do not know enough of you,” she said at last, feeling she must say something.

“No? I have been here more than half a year, Mrs. Escott,—is not that a sufficient length of time in which to form an opinion of a near neighbour, and one so intimate as I have been with you? But come, tell me what is it you wish to know?—I will give you any information you require. What can I tell you?”

“A little of your past history,” said Mrs. Escott, in a voice not too well assured, for there was an expression in their guest’s face not quite so complacent as his words.

“My past history is brief and commonplace enough,” said Mr. Trelawney disdainfully. “At six-and-twenty I inherited my uncle’s property of

two thousand a year ; at thirty-two I married ; my wife died after a few years of marriage ; and shortly after I sold my estate and invested my money in the funds. I have no more to say. Does this account satisfy you ? ”

“ It is very vague,” suggested Mr. Escott, taking courage as it seemed possible they were getting a foothold.

“ How can I fill up the outline ? Will it make me more likely to be a good husband to Miss Escott if I enter into details which cannot possibly interest any one ? Suggest your own questions, I beg of you, and I will answer them. But I cannot frame a list of objections for you, and then reply to them, as I naturally do not understand the direction which your suspicions would take.”

“ Not suspicions, Mr. Trelawney,—that is a harsh word ; a little dissatisfaction, perhaps, at all this vagueness ; a little desire——” Here the Rector hesitated.

“ I wait your conclusion,” said Mr. Trelawney haughtily.

“ You are so old ! ” burst out Mrs. Escott. “ Your face is older than the rector’s, and your hair is turning grey ! ”

“ I am thirty-eight,” said Jasper, “ and your daughter is twenty-one.”

“ Seventeen years’ difference ! Far too much ! ” cried both parents at once.

“ And if she does not think so ? That is a question solely concerning her ; — ugly, grey, wrinkled, old, she alone can decide whether I am pleasing to her or not ; and if pleasing to her, my unpersonableness in the eyes of others neither afflicts my pride, nor affects her right of judgment.”

“ Aura is an ungrateful girl ! ” cried Mrs. Escott. “ She never was a dutiful child—never ! It is unknown the trouble I have had with her, and all that I have had to put up with from her ; I am ashamed of her, that I am ! ”

“ Blame me, madam, as long as you like, but I cannot allow you to say a harsh word of your daughter before me ! ” exclaimed Jasper, with a sudden flaming of cheek and eye that spoke the

man defending his own ; the defence, not only of love, but of right and holding.

From that moment both father and mother felt that their child's life had slipped for ever from their grasp, and that she was no longer theirs, but his.

Then they yielded ; Mrs. Escott crying passionately and Mr. Escott fuming about the room, muttering half-a-dozen times, "I only wish that my boy Herbert had been at home."

"Of course, if it is Aura's choice, we must yield," he then said to Mr. Trelawney ; "still, we must always wish it had never been. Dear, dear!" lifting up his hands, "who would have expected it?"

"Of course we cannot oppose her," sobbed Mrs. Escott, "but I'm sure I wish so too."

"Then the thing is settled ?" said Mr. Trelawney, rising ; "and now it only remains for me to make such provision for your daughter as shall meet your wishes, and to arrange for the wedding as soon as may be convenient. I fear I shall not be able to give you a very long

time between this and then," he added in a slow distinct voice.

"I suppose it must be so," said Mr. Escott petulantly. "But how shall we ever get on without Aura is more than I can tell. It is a cruel case—a cruel case!"

"A very cruel one," echoed the mother; "and who will take care of the greenhouse, and help me in the housekeeping? Oh, dear! it is a shame!"

"We will go into the business arrangements hereafter," said the inexorable Mr. Trelawney; "for the present my mission is accomplished, and," smiling, "the most important question decided. Good morning, Mrs. Escott; don't rise."

Mrs. Escott was not thinking of rising.

"Good morning, my dear sir. Believe me," he added cordially, "you shall have no cause to repent your confidence in me, and you will find me a faithful guardian of your daughter's happiness."

He left the room, neither Mr. nor Mrs. Escott

returning his salutation--the one standing with his face to the window, drumming his fingers on a little occasional table, and the other in her easy chair, with her handkerchief to her eyes, sobbing. Mr. Trelawney closed the door quickly, and no one who had seen him casually would have said that he had been speaking of anything more exciting than the state of the crops or the defeat of the ministry. But had they looked more narrowly they would have seen how the thick moustache was wet, and how large and fixed were the pupils of his eyes, how the deep lines about his mouth and cheek were drawn and furrowed, and his lips compressed even beyond their natural compression ; but in outward air and manner not a trace of what he felt could be found. Exactly the same as ever, well-bred, proud, courteous, reserved, and haughty, he passed from the drawing-room into the garden, carrying with him the impression of having maintained a combat and secured a victory, and leaving behind him that of defeat.

He knew where to find Aura. In the shrubbery

beneath the large horse-chestnut she sat waiting for him. She heard his step, and started up—turning towards him with lips apart and breathless ; her eyes cast down, in too great fear yet to raise them. Jasper uttered a low cry. She had never heard a sound that gave out so full an utterance of love as this—that was so laden with the accent of relief and joy. She looked up then, knowing all ; and holding out her hands to him ran to meet him.

“ Aura, my Aura ! my love—my life—my Wife—I have won you ! ”

Aura clasped her arms about him, and pressed her face against his bent down to her.

“ Aura, tell me that you love me ! ” he said ; “ tell me that you do not regret your promise. Let me feel your lips again, my Aura ! and let me hear you say that you will be my wife now and for ever —my wife for ever, in this life and in the next ! Tell me that you love me, Aura, and that I may rest on your heart, and never fear sorrow or separation more ! Tell me, beloved, that you trust me, and that you will stand by me whatever may come upon me ! ”

Oh, the pale wrought face that looked down into hers!—the depth of those searching eyes—the nervous quivering of the whitened lip—the strained arm that held her like a dying man's last hope, to the throbbing, fevered heart! Who would have recognized the cold Master of Croft in that wild lover, with all the force of manhood and the exaltation of youth in his love? binding the golden sheaves of summer with the flowers of the early spring! How Aura loved him in return! how she laid her heart in holy honour at his feet, and held herself blessed beyond all women for the priceless privilege of so loving him!

“I do love you, Jasper,” she said softly, but bending back so that she could look into his face. “I love you so that every tale and poem I have ever read seems cold and poor compared to what I feel; and I will never desert you, come what may; not if I alone of the whole world stand by you! I do love you; I do; and my whole life shall prove it!”

“Rest at last! Thank God that I have at last found my rest!”

And then Aura felt the hot tears fall heavy upon her hands and neck, as Jasper, overwrought and broken, wept as only strong men weep when the strain of the long conflict is over.

CHAPTER IV.

THOUGH the marriage was one of the most ordinary kind in all its circumstances, yet it created an excitement at Clive Vale as if it had been a thing unprecedented, and against the eccentricity of which the world had the licence of complaint. Not a voice was raised in its favour ; but for all that there was not an unmarried woman in the Vale who did not envy Aura. Never had the Master of Croft been so severely handled and the vague rumours concerning him brought so near to definite accusations, and never had Aura been so bitterly condemned. She was too young for him, and she was *passée* ; she had manœuvred, and she was deceived ; she had caught the prize for which she had so openly angled, and she had been caught

by her own vanity and credulity ; as for Mr. Tre-lawney, he was a swindler hiding from his creditors and marrying her for her dowry, and he was a gentleman of good condition—far too good for a country parson's daughter without birth or fortune to speak of ; he was a man of bad character and no honest father should have given him his daughter, and an unhappy man whose feelings had been traded on to the profit of base designers. The Escotts were crafty or they were silly—she a managing mother, or pitiable weak and overruled ; he a clever father with an eye to his interests, or a mere cipher led by his wife and daughter. Each opposite view owned its adherents, and not one of the many notes of dissatisfaction was wanting to complete the full chord of condemnation that swept, trumpet-tongued, through the Vale.

But angry as every one was, and bitter too, no one was so wrathful as Mr. Patrick Grainger. Whether or no he had been nourishing for Aura that tepid kind of love common to well-to-do bachelors in country societies, where there is

nothing to excite to a decision because there is no fear of loss by the delay—where the present is so comfortable it is a pity to hazard a change, yet where the woman is too charming to be definitely renounced—whether or no Mr. Patrick Grainger had been indulging in this platonic philandering for the Rector's daughter, no one knew ; but sure it was that he was very irate and very bitter, congratulating Miss Escott as if his words were wasps and stung his throat, but turning his back on Mr. Trelawney when they met in the market-place one day, though recalled to his senses and good breeding by that gentleman's haughty voice, which had something so hard and imperative in it that Mr. Grainger lost his foot-hold and stumbled into a rather extraordinary display of courtesy. In revenge, he flirted outrageously with Zillah Price :—and how proud poor Zillah was too, and how she played off her new conquest both on Mr. Bennet and Major Morgan, also of the platonic philandering school !—and in other ways showed his weak place, and how hard he had been hit.

The Escotts fretted dreadfully, and taxed poor Aura's conscience with no light weight of doubt. For the involuntary self-reproach, the anxious thought, would perpetually recur; would it not have been her better duty to have remained at home unmarried, and thus have cared for her father and mother and cheered their failing lives? She could not always reconcile her decision with her conscience, for a mother's tears are hard to bear, even when they flow from temper more than from grief, and the firmest nature must be shaken by continual storms. It was a bad time for her in these days, poor girl! Mrs. Escott told her twenty times a day that she was undutiful and selfish, and had behaved with indelicate haste in the whole affair; and her father scarcely ever kissed her, but turned away from her when she would have caressed him, saying, "Oh! you don't care for *me* now! You are not *my* Aura! You only care for this fellow that no one knows anything about; and for a stranger you have not known seven full months, will leave your father and mother who have loved you all your life!"

Every little action of her girlish home-life with them was ostentatiously put away like a thing dead and buried and done with : the backgammon board was tied up in brown paper and taken up into the box-room—"We shall not want it now," said Mrs. Escott, weeping, "there is no one to play with poor papa, for the noise of the dice hurts my poor head ;" the book club was given up—"There is no one to read to us now, and your poor papa's eyes are bad, and so are mine ; I have spoilt mine with crying so much, Aura ! " every article of her trousseau was made occasion for a fresh fit of weeping and fresh reproaches ; and "all this finery and fandanglement" was held up to her as part of the reason, and a good part too, which had seduced her from her home and her parents ; "Oh ! yes, a fine white gown and lace flounces, Aura, are better than a grey linsey with only your poor papa and me to see it ! " and, "Money and a fine house, Aura, are far before a dull home with only a father and mother to love ;" and, "Of course you will be the gayest of the gay, Aura, and *we* shall not be fit company

for you ; " and, " I hope sincerely you may never know the sorrow we are knowing, from the ingratitude of any of your own children ; " and, " Oh ! it is a grand thing to neglect the duties that lie before you and don't bring you any particular credit, to run after other people's children, and pretend to be a mother to two little forward brats you cannot love, and I am sure ought not if half that is said about their own mamma is true ! " with variations in the same key on every theme that presented itself. Were not the times then bad to Aura ? Was it any wonder that even her strength would occasionally give way ?—for we are never at our strongest when most stirred—and that she would lock herself in her own room, and weep from utter weariness and doubt combined ? But when she had been refreshed by Jasper's presence, and the greatness of his love and the power of his nature had soothed and raised her, then she gathered strength again, and bore the rest as she best could, remembering that the noblest duties do not always lie behind the garden walls of home, and that human life was given for wider space and

larger good than what even the dearest roof-tree overshadows. And so, between gossip and detraction, tears, reproaches, hope, and love, the time passed, as all time passes whether smiling or tear-laden, and the wedding-day drew near—the day that was to baptize Aura into the holiest office of a woman's life.

The settlements were signed, and Mr. Trelawney "behaved very handsomely, that I must say, giving every one their due," said Mrs. Escott, with a sulky kind of admission; "declining any present fortune with Aura, and settling a thousand a year on her without reserve, the other to the children after her lifetime; which was very comforting, you know," she observed to Mrs. Price; the latter listening with the same expression on her face as she had when Mr. Trelawney was one day laughing at the Jewish Mission and the Jewish Bishopric, both of which were to her second in value only to the Bible.

"I daresay it is comforting to you in a worldly sense," she answered sourly; "but, for my own part, I never trust the material assurances of a

man so lamentably unsound as Mr. Trelawney. He is too near to atheism to please *me*, my dear ; but I hope that you may have no cause to repent your confidence in him."

" I am sure I hope so, too ! " said Mrs. Escott beginning to cry. " But it is a cruel case, and Aura is so self-willed ! "

" She should have been *my* daughter," returned Mrs. Price with grim emphasis.

It was well for Aura she was not.

At last the day actually came, and with it the traditional ceremonials — the white dress and flowing veil ; the orange blossoms and myrtle flowers ; the bouquet and the breakfast and the favours ; the high-mettled white horses with ear-caps and rosettes ; the wedding-cards and the maiden name on the fly of the envelope ; the great white cake and the bridesmaids' dream-pieces ; all of which count so much in the ratifying of an English marriage. A couple dressed in work-a-day clothes and breakfasting off weak tea and leathery toast before walking soberly to the church, do not seem half so much married as

those whose bridal finery parades the bridal fact, and whose orthodoxy is proved by minor vouchers as indispensable if less solemn than the church service. And Mr. Trelawney, sensitive and proud as he was, had on this occasion to yield to custom like the weakest-minded of us all who put our trust in silks and satins. He wore his wedding-gloves and made his wedding speech just as any smaller man might have done ; but he registered a vow, internally, that this was the last time when he would recognize the claim of friends, relatives, society, or custom on his wife, and that, this mummery once over, henceforth she was his, and none other's.

They left the Vale for only a short wedding-tour ; Aura saying that she did not like to leave the children longer than she was obliged, for poor white-eyed Miss Bond was not a very efficient manager, and Jasper, too happy to wish for any place but home, which is the culmination of happiness to every man. So they came back as early as was possible—far too early for the Vale, which insisted on the ordinary month, at all

events, and then began in practice their long-talked of ideal of domestic life.

It was a rich life, and a full one, which they began together; the very perfection of a country life which assumes no responsibilities and undertakes no public functions. A perfectly appointed house in the midst of lovely scenery; sufficient means never to leave a reasonable wish ungratified, yet not so wealthy as to entail of necessity political position; their house, which else might have been too still, made bright and merry with the children's sweet young voices and ceaseless, patterning feet, and enlivened by that freshness and movement and change without inconstancy which nothing but the daily growth and development of children can give; a life of intellectual culture, which the intense love between them and the thousand requirements of the little ones kept from narrowing down into the mere selfishness of thought, so great a danger with studious people of retired habits in the country;—nothing was wanting to complete the circle of earthly blessedness; and the Croft represented as perfect

human happiness as might be attained under the imperfect conditions of human nature.

As for Aura, she had never pictured such a life as she led now ; it surpassed even the loveliest of her girlish daydreams, and made everything else —honours, glories, pleasures—all seem lifeless and monotonous compared with it. She read with her husband so many hours in the day, conscientiously and thoroughly ; as thoroughly indeed as a working student would have done ; and then she turned gaily to the children and romped with them as if she had been a child herself ; or she passed the morning in Jasper's painting-room, working from the same model, or in practising the same musical study ; after having first gone through her housekeeping with the care and diligence, the attention to small things and unshrinking moral courage, the organizing power and the faculty for details, which belong to a good general and a good housekeeper. For she was not one of those who hold a woman's work to be below a woman's regard, and did not find that she was less capable of understanding Goethe or Titian,

because she had just been counting dusters, and checking the week's supply of lard and potatoes. In consequence of which, the house and grounds had a something about them that was not only wealth, and perfectness of appointment, and sufficiency of service, but a certain, as it were, spiritual beauty, an unseen aureole, a hidden aroma, a secret harmony, which no one could absolutely specify wherein it resided, but which every one felt ; though Mrs. Price expressed it by “extravagance ;” and old Miss Mason said “it was all very well to have things as nice as Mrs. Trelawney, when they had money to make them nice with ;” and Mrs. Escott whimpered when she complained that “nothing that *she* had was good enough for Aura now ;” and Mr. Bennet lamented Mrs. Trelawney’s “entire devotion to material things ;” and the Miss Campbells took Croft for their model, but failed in the application, because they had not understood the secret ; and Mr. Grainger said that “fond as he was of order, he confessed the primness of Croft was too much for him.” Only aunt Dess, enlightened by the wisdom of love,

saw into the meaning of it all ; and she said Croft was so beautiful because it was Aura's, and she had the power of making everything lovely that she touched. As who has not, with love, intelligence, thought, and industry ?

The children too, little Julia and Mabel, were as beautiful as the rest, full of promise for the future and rich in the present with the precious graces of childhood. They had never known another mother than Aura, and soon forgot that there was once a time when she was not ; so that there was no cause to fear their ingratitude or want of love for her as they grew up ; and for herself, she neither showed nor knew any difference between them and the little ones whom a good God laid, as years passed by, in her loving arms. They were all one family, and no one could have singled out the elder ones of adoption from the younger ones of nature. They were never "these" and "those," "his" and "mine," but always "our children, our little ones," all born of the same life and nourished with the same love. People said it was odd, and some

declared that she could not love her own as she ought, if she could be so very impartial. "True love is never catholic," said Mr. Bennet, with a double meaning, one ecclesiastical, the other personal; but Jasper knew that though there was no preference there was no stint, and that it was the equality of fulness which they shared, not the evenhandedness of poverty.

And so the time wore on, and Aura, as she sat in the bright summer days beneath the shade of the garden-trees, her husband by her side sketching with her or reading aloud while she worked, the children playing on the grass near them, or swinging in the swing put up for them between two elms in the avenue, or rolling over Pon the great black hound, who, Jasper used to say, was "equal to any gentleman of his own acquaintance, and superior to many"—as Aura sat there and thought, she could scarcely realise the space which lay between this rich and real life of the present, this vitality and vigour of her womanhood, and the cramped and wasted energies of her girlhood. For though there had been no active unhappiness then,

what a scattered objectless life it was, compared to the present! No events, no progress, no settled study—Mrs. Escott was far too restless; and required too much companionship, to allow of that in her neighbourhood—and all the days taken up in gossip and fruitless visits out of doors, and in irregular housekeeping within, with fits of causeless temper that had to be soothed and kissed and flattered away. Since her brother Herbert went to India, how dull the summers had been, and how long those dreary winter evenings with that eternal fancy needlework, while her father read aloud, as his pastoral and domestic duty, dry pages out of Blair or Sherlock, and her mother dozed off in her chair, to wake up cross and peevish when Jane brought in tea, and made a noise in setting the tray! But now, beautiful as her summer existence was, the winter gave one just as lovely. Those long warm luxurious evenings with the new books uncut on the table, the new song to learn, and her unfinished picture to think over; with the children scattered about the spacious room, playing under the broad light which fell on

their glossy hair and rose-red cheeks, now hiding in the folds of the heavy crimson curtains, their little sandalled feet peeping from below and their white frocks shining out against the colour ; now sitting all together, grouped in a living picture on the large grey wild-cat's skin, which made their own domain in the drawing-room ; and again clambering about the father and mother—the younger ones nestling in her lap, and the elders beseeching him for a pretty story—those evenings alone would have been worth living for through years of sorrow ; what were they then, after days of peace and love ?

Her life was setting its mark on Aura. Always beautiful, she was now supremely lovely ; and though six years had passed since she and Jasper stood that summer evening between the rows of golden corn, yet she looked, if more matured, almost as young as before her marriage. She was in better health and so was fairer and with greater transparency of skin ; the lines about the cheek and throat were rounder, and the deep grey eyes were brighter, darker, and more joyous ; her

face had lost its old wistful look of self-repression and incompleteness, and was now as serene and hallowed as a nun's, but with more love in it and more knowledge; it was a face which told of the peace and order and love and beauty of her home, and which left on you the impression of a sweet and holy word; it was a face which the poor and the sick said it did them good to see, which all children instinctively loved, and which the old God-blessed with affectionate familiarity as if it had been a daughter's; and it was a true face, and in its peaceful sweetness told the story of her life.

But Jasper and Aura were not popular in the Vale. For they declined all society, and neither gave nor went to "parties," dinner, evening, or day; not even to the Rectory; which mark of undutifulness and the entire transfer of the daughter to the husband, made Mrs. Escott the object of universal commiseration. But Jasper was firm; "they did not visit,"—at least he did not, he left Aura to act for herself; and of course she acted in accord with him. What loving

woman newly married does other? This completed the general dissatisfaction, and by the time Aura had been married six years there was scarcely a person of the whole society who had not a stone to fling, and an ugly prophecy to make concerning the future fate of the proud possessors of Croft. The whole thing was a perpetual thorn in the side of the Vale, which it bit and gnawed at fiercely and in vain. As Aura was not a gossip she never heard what was said of them, nor how small events were magnified into actual crimes, and their peaceful daily lives torn asunder, fibre by fibre, to be rewoven into a tissue of evil. The primal mystery about Mr. Trelawney never lost its fascination; and they now had it in hand to settle, not only that, and what it was, and how it went, but also whether Aura knew of it; and if so, how far she was culpable in concealing it from her parents, and in countenancing its continuance.

“Obdurate and impenitent as she always was,” said Mr. Bennet speaking of her to Mrs. Price; “self-willed too, and stiffnecked, we have no assurance in her that it may not be something of

the most damaging and even disgraceful character. I have often thought whether it was not due to my office to publicly renounce that man, whom I honestly believe to be a man of sin, unless he can give some satisfactory proof that he is what a Christian and a clergyman may countenance."

"It would be a powerful example," said Mrs. Price, but not too warmly, being afraid of any very public demonstrations. "As for her," she continued bitterly, "I confess she was never a favourite of mine, and for a long time I have suspected her of more than a mere leaning to Socinianism. I have heard her say things, Mr. Bennet, which were not far off it, I can assure you ! I do not wish my opinion repeated," she added, "for sake of that poor foolish couple at the Rectory ; and also because I do not wish to do the young woman greater harm than what she has done herself. The time will come for both of them, you may be sure, dear sir, and till then let her own bad conscience be her worst accuser ! "

But from that day it was known throughout the Vale as a certain truth, that Mrs. Trelawney had

been corrupted by her husband till she was as bad as himself, and was now a declared atheist and materialist.

What would the Hollies have said if it had known that the cause of Mr. Bennet's intense enmity to Aura was a certain letter written to her about eight years ago—when he first came to the curacy—and a certain interview forced upon her afterwards, which ended in her very contemptuously declining the offer of his hand, and very passionately slapping his face for the freedom with which he sought to convince her that he was a man worthy of its acceptance ? Something of this kind, on one side or the other, generally lies at the root of all extraordinary dislikes between men and women ; but Mrs. Price, though she knew this side of human life well enough, never once opened her eyes on Mr. Bennet's secret, and never came to a knowledge of the rejected love in which his uncompromising hate had root. If she had, she would not have welcomed him to the Hollies quite so cordially as she did ; and she would not have professed quite the same amount of satisfaction in

his ministry as she did ; and she would have extended the ægis of her presence more frequently over Zillah and Sara when in his company ; and she would have found that, instead of being a sheep milk-white and innocent, Mr. Bennet was a wolf as black as night, and by no means to be admitted within the home-fold. How a little ray of truth would sometimes alter the whole aspect of a life !

CHAPTER V.

ONE bright spring Sunday morning just as the service had begun a stranger appeared in Clive Vale church ; gliding into Mr. Patrick Grainger's pew, which was handy to the side door where he entered, and which also, because of the heat, had its own door thrown open, as was the Clive Vale habit. He was a man rather below the middle height and a few years less than middle age ; remarkably well dressed as every one said, but in clothes of a decidedly foreign cut, which set off to the fullest advantage his neat, lithe, dapper figure, and with all the small appointments about him—straw-coloured gloves, polished boots, jaunty cane, &c.,—speaking the town-bred man unused to the rougher requirements of the country. Perhaps he was a

Londoner ; but he was a little too elaborate for that —more likely he was a Parisian, if not a Viennese, or a dandified New Yorker aping European pretensions. He stared about him a good deal during the service, his looks falling chiefly upon Aura sitting in the big red pew with the three children, Julia, Mabel, and her own eldest boy little Jasper, or Dotty as he was called at times for a difference ; and when they wandered from her they rested on the four Miss Campbells, decidedly the prettiest four in the church ; for even Myssie Campbell at thirty was a handsome, sonsy, well-favoured woman, while Lotty, now six-and-twenty, was still fresh and good-humoured, with the white hand and glossy ringlets of olden time ; and Kate and Ellen—Ellen only twenty—were in the very heyday of their vivacious beauty : bright-eyed brunettes both of them—Kate a brunette revelling in yellow, and Ellen sticking on scarlet bows and flowers wherever she could put them. No change had taken place among them ; they were still the four Miss Campbells, and the four Miss Campbells they seemed likely to remain. No one having

come forward as the Vale phrase had it, save Dr. Hale to sister Kate ; and he had been indignantly refused ; spinsterhood for life not being yet so imminent that escape by such a mésalliance was possible. Harry Grant, it was said, was presumptuously and hopelessly in love with Miss Ellen who held him on and off as occasion served, but who was not barbarous on the whole ; and save this not very damaging bit of gossip no one else was assigned them. Neither had Miss Zillah Price found her anchorage, nor Miss Sara ; and time was passing with them a little rapidly ; nor indeed had any of the young ladies in or about Clive Vale, since Aura Escott married Jasper Trelawney.

If the stranger gave much attention to his fellow-worshippers be sure he received more. He was a small, light-made man, as has been said ; something after the Hindù type, dark, wiry, and supple ; the brow was flat and the head was low ; there was an immense width behind the ears, the jaw was broad, and the chin was sharp and pointed ; it was a face that had a certain strange analogy to both a snake's and a tiger's, and yet

it was handsome, save to those few who can read faces. But such as it was it created a sensation in Clive Vale almost unparalleled: decidedly unparalleled since the Master of Croft had first stood up in his place more than six years ago now. As how should it not? A handsome, well-dressed gentleman in straw-coloured kid gloves and French kid boots; with black hair artistically curled and trimmed so as to hide the thinning tract on the top; with moustaches à la militaire twisted to the finest spiral points, and a beard à l'Empereur; with rings and chains and studs and pins; with waistcoat buttons of coral; with scarves of gorgeous hues and wonderful designs; and scented so that he perfumed the whole aisle where he sat, was not likely to make his devotions at Clive Vale church unnoticed. The four Miss Campbells openly stared and made whispered remarks about him to one another when they sat down; the Misses Price glanced demurely—sheep ogling at the wolf through the bars; and even Hannah and aunt Dess looked once, but not again. Mr. Bennet himself, who read the

prayers, tripped twice in the Litany for injudicious glancing off his page; and not a few young women that morning lost their places in the Prayer-book, and went wandering among the collects for the day when they ought to have been in the psalms. It was a pardonable flutter of spirits considering the dearth of pleasurable excitement in the community, and how long it was since they had seen a stranger among them—the Campbell boys and their friends not showing this year as usual.

When service was ended and the congregation was retiring, the stranger bowed low to Mr. Grainger, with the peculiar bow of a foreigner, in mute thanks for his hospitality; but instead of leaving with the rest, he lingered about the church, inspecting the very ordinary stained chancel window and common-place mural tablets as if they had been matters of real ecclesiastical interest; peering about everywhere, until Mr. Grainger, who seemed to consider himself somewhat as his godfather, turned back from the door and came up to him to ask him if he could ex-

plain anything he wished to know, or conduct him to any special point of search ?

“The church does not boast many objects of general interest,” he said; “but you may have some specific object to which I can help you by the privilege of knowledge belonging to an old inhabitant.”

“Thank you,” said the stranger bowing. “I was not searching for anything in particular, or of personal interest; I was merely looking to see what you had, being fond of ecclesiastical architecture; on which indeed I am preparing a somewhat extensive work.”

“Oh ! indeed,” ejaculated Mr. Grainger, with the country gentleman’s reverence for an author expressed in his voice.

“And taking a particular interest in village life,” continued the stranger, with the same quiet manner as before as if he had not heard Mr. Grainger’s exclamation. “I came here last night en route to your brave old town of Corston; where I have much archaeological wealth to study. And I own the beauty and quietude of your little village so charmed me that I suffered myself to

be detained—ma foi ! sacrificing my fare to my whim ; which I mention as a proof of the fascination which this exquisite retreat has had on me ! ”

Mr. Grainger smiled. All country people like to hear their place of residence praised ; it is as potent and a more delicate flattery than praise of themselves and their families.

“ It is a pretty little village enough,” he said ; “ and the walks and drives about are very pleasant ; but it is dull too ; and any one used to the gay world, as I can see you are, sir, would find us a sad prosy set I am afraid. Your life is a very different thing to ours,” with affected depreciation in his tone.

By this time they were in the churchyard, and the stranger acknowledged the implied compliment by lifting his hat an inch from his head, casting his sharp brown eyes—brown shot with red—quickly on his companion as if taking his measure ; as indeed he was.

“ True in a way,” he said ; “ but a life of pleasure palls at last on a man who has anything in him beyond the mere parks and boulevards ;

and after years spent in Paris and Vienna and at fashionable watering-places—which are only Paris and Vienna in little and decked out in charming summer costume—one gets a kind of longing for the calm English life, the secluded village, sweet Auburn, White's Selborne, and all that kind of thing you know. As you can well understand."

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Grainger; "but there is such a deal to see and do in London! I like going there every now and then to rub off the rust a little. One gets rusty very soon in Clive Vale where there is so little going on."

"At all events monsieur is tolerably well free from this rust," said the stranger politely.

"Oh! I rub myself up a little oftener than the rest," returned Mr. Patrick Grainger concitedly. "But though ours is a pretty place and a good place, it is awfully slow; and there is no life here for any man; it is terribly like being buried alive."

"It would not do for me then! I should not like to give up altogether just yet," returned the stranger gaily. "I feel a little too much vigorous blood in me for a living burial. Men of my tem-

perament and of yours, sir, keep young for a long time, and never get quite up to Zimmermann or Robinson Crusoe, not at the age of old Parr himself!"

"He is an educated man and knows our English classics well," thought Mr. Grainger; as it was intended he should think.

"Certainly," the strange gentleman went on to say in a musing tone as if speaking partly to himself, "I could get some fellows of my own set down here—le Duc de Lavalette and le Comte de Chartreuse, and young Sir Lamb Gage; bons garçons all of them; but I fear they would be a little too wild for our sweet Auburn, and might create more havoc than would be advisable among your young ladies and young persons. I am of a milder trempe, and can rusticate for a time with genuine country simplicity; besides I have my occupations."

He spoke in the easiest and airiest manner of assurance possible, as if his genealogy and career were patent to all men, and there could be no question of him whatever there was of his friends;

the quis custodiet? not applying the least in the world to him.

“ You would have to supply your own society if you were to live here,” said Mr. Grainger half laughing; “ we could do but little in that way.”

“ No? and yet there seemed to be a good many very charming and interesting people at church to-day. As you have been so polite hitherto—and it is long since I have met with a more agreeable chance companion than monsieur—ma foi I have been so long abroad I cannot speak my own tongue without tripping!—be now so obliging as to tell me a little who some of them were. Who was that worthy old pastor who preached—and faith! a very good sermon too: I wish we all lived up to his directions—who is he? and the younger man who looks scarcely so full of the milk of human kindness, who is he also?—his son? ”

“ No,” said Mr. Grainger; “ the older man is Mr. Escott our rector, and a good-hearted old man too; the younger is the curate Mr. Bennet, a man of more extreme views than

the Rector, and I confess not so much to my taste. But then I am conservative and like what I have been used to," a little grimly.

"Just so; and these young men who would dragoon our souls to heaven are uncomfortable companions, and in nine times out of ten insufferably conceited."

"You have hit it exactly," cried Mr. Grainger eagerly; for he was by no means of the Bennet party and abjured Calvinism as heartily as he did Romanism, both being equally "pestilent," in his vocabulary.

"And that tall military-looking gentleman who repeated the responses so very loudly, and sang such a powerful bass so many tones too flat?"

"That is Major Morgan, a retired East Indian officer."

"À la bonne heure!" laughed the stranger; "then I was not so far out!"

Mr. Grainger laughed too; the gentleman's manner of mirth was infectious; it was so light and airy and sported over the surface of things with such an easy grace.

"No; you were not," he replied. "One gets that quickness of observation by a town life. *I* know that!" a little consequentially, and with a sudden straightening of his back.

"So I perceive," said the stranger with another bow, and a glance as sharp as before. "Monsieur has lived in cities; that is easy to see. Parbleu! we men of the world recognize each other under any disguise by a masonic touch! And now he is a rentier at home, a gentleman living on his own estate and enjoying the *otium cum dignitate* as much as he once enjoyed the fun of the fair. I knew these things, moi! none better; and before I had been ten minutes in the church I had toisé monsieur, and perceived the air of the man of the world. Confess now that I have told your fortune as well as any gipsy of Norwood!"

"Partly," said Mr. Patrick Grainger much pleased; "only that you have exaggerated the amount of my landed interest. My property can scarcely be called an estate; it is only a small farm, to which however I attach supreme importance because of its having been so long in

the family. My great-grandfather bought it, and we have been Patrick Graingers holding it ever since."

"And now?—there is no Patrick Grainger to succeed," said the stranger, reading his face with the quickness of thought.

"How keen you are!" cried Mr. Grainger incautiously: and with this remark he dropped the slight guard he had held, and placed himself in the stranger's power.

"The habit of observation; that is all; combined with rather rare opportunities for studying men and manners," said the stranger indifferently. "All things in life are to be gained by practice; and the practice of reading men, their lives, occupations, characters—in a word their status and calibre—is a thing to be learnt like the rest. I believe I am a tolerable proficient; but so I should be, for I have studied my kind in every capital and court of Europe," he added slightly, as if court life was every-day life to him; so slightly, that no one could call it ostentation. "And now for the ladies," he said gallantly, "though they

should have come first. Who was that pretty, black-haired demoiselle with the scarlet pompon in her bonnet, sitting in the square pew at our side? un peu coquette, n'est-ce pas? mais pimpante et fraîche comme une rose!"

Mr. Grainger did not understand French when spoken, but he did understand looks.

"She is Miss Ellen Campbell," he said with something of the ordinary Grainger primness; "the youngest of the four sisters who sat there; a very nice girl indeed, and a general favourite with every one."

He spoke with decidedly more reserve than when discussing the gentlemen; feeling a kind of brotherly right of protection over the innocent young ladies he had known from their very cradles. And the stranger was quite clever enough to understand the tone, as he was clever enough to understand all tones and all accents and all looks too.

"So I should think," he said quietly. "There is nothing so charming as one of those fresh young English girls, living in a secluded place

like this, safe from the very presence of evil not to speak of its influence. A kind of home-feeling, hein ? which makes us all—we men I mean—reverence them like sisters or daughters, and feel that it would be a personal insult to our honour which he would have to answer—ma foi ! perhaps with his life—if any sacrilegious wretch dared molest or injure them ? ”

“ Decidedly a man of high and delicate principles,” thought Mr. Grainger ; then he said aloud : “ you have expressed my very thought, sir ; ” and he said it warmly.

“ I knew it,” said the stranger tranquilly. “ Then—but do I bore you by my questions ?—no ?—you are very good !—who was that belle femme, that lady who sat with her children in the red pew of the haute aristocratie—who was she ? A very lovely lady, don’t you think so ? ”

“ She is Mrs. Trelawney,” replied Mr. Grainger curtly.

“ She would make a sensation at the Tuileries,” observed the stranger in a matter-of-fact tone, as if he lived at Louis Napoleon’s elbow. “ Many

a belle among us has not half her beauty. Ah ! Dieu de Dieu ! comme c'est charmant ! " he exclaimed, stopping short in his walk and pointing to Croft, which just then looked its best in the full summer sunshine and from the point where they stood. Set up on a height, but protected by the dark belt of wood which made so effective a background for its stately, square, Italian front ; the long, soft line of park-like meadow studded with clumps of flowering bushes, and grand old trees shadowing the bright grass singly and in groups ; the ivied lodge with its climbing roses against the freestone porch and its trim garden full of sweet, old-fashioned flowers, standing as warder to the grey drive leading through the shrubbery to the house—it was the very ideal of a lovely English home—a place which no stranger could pass unmarked.

" Whose is that paradise, eh ? " asked Mr. Grainger's companion, as he might have asked any other question.

" That is Croft where Mr. Jasper Trelawney lives—the husband of the lady with the children

'you were asking about," replied Mr. Grainger not so amiably as before. He never was amiable when the question was of Jasper and Aura.

"Jasper Trelawney?" repeated the stranger slowly. "Jasper Trelawney?—you are sure?"

"I ought to be," answered Mr. Grainger with a sniff.

"And no other name?—none?"

"None," he said, watching his companion's face eagerly. "What did he mean by his 'no other name?'" he thought.

"You are sure?" again asked the stranger, his eyes still fixed on the house.

"As sure as one can be of anything concerning a new comer whose past life one does not know," said Mr. Grainger. "We do not know more of Mr. Jasper Trelawney than he chooses to tell us; and that is not much I promise you."

"C'est drôle ça!" said the stranger putting his forefinger to his forehead. "That looks as if he had something to conceal—does it not, monsieur?"

"One would conceive so," said Mr. Grainger.

“ And so he is the husband of that lovely lady? and the father I presume of the children with her?”

“ Yes.”

“ She is young to be the mother of children of that age. That eldest petite is not far off twelve years of age, and she is not yet five-and-twenty I should say.”

“ They are not this Mrs. Trelawney’s, who is seven-and-twenty,” Mr. Grainger said. “ Mr. Trelawney was married before, and the youngest of those in church to-day was the only one who belonged really to her. You have guessed little Miss Trelawney’s age quite correctly, though you were out with her stepmother’s; she is just twelve; for she was six when Miss Aura was married, and she has been Mrs. Trelawney six years now; so that makes them twelve and twenty-seven.”

“ Ah indeed!—and so he was married before? To whom pray? Excuse my importunities which may seem strange to you, but I had once a friend whose history is not unlike that of your Mr. Trelawney, and I am curious, especially as the names

agree ; and you must own, monsieur, that Jasper Trelawney is not every one's appellation."

"No—it is a queer name enough," replied Mr. Grainger sourly. "But as for his former wife no one knows anything about her," he said with the air of a man detailing a grievance. "She was a foreigner, I believe ; at least the children could not speak the Queen's English when they came. But though I went up to London, knowing life pretty well there, to make inquiries before we would let Miss Aura marry him I could find nothing about him."

"The children's names if you please ?" very rapidly.

"Julia and Mabel."

The stranger snapped his fingers.

"Aha ! enfoncé !" he cried with a flash of triumph, that passed across his face as a flash of lightning through the dark, revealing the ugliness unseen before ; and then he laughed ; and it was an unpleasant laugh, which made Mr. Grainger shudder and turn pale, for it seemed as if it expressed Mr. Trelawney's exposure

and downfall, and then—poor Miss Aura ! as he still called her affectionately in his heart. Conceited, fussy, commonplace, and gossiping, Mr. Grainger had nothing really bad about him, and was the last to wish any tragic consequences to result, however bitter his tongue and loud his talk. The Vale was ill-natured altogether, chiefly because it had nothing to do ; and he being one of the most unoccupied was also one of the most ill-natured among them ; but he was not capable of doing any one a real damage : at least not in cold blood.

His startled look, so full of vague fear, did not escape the notice of the keen-eyed stranger.

“ I think I know your Jasper Trelawney,” he then said quite naturally and innocently. “ I think I knew him in Paris some few years ago—I am not sure ; and it may turn out to be another person after all ; but the circumstances are strikingly alike. I will call to-morrow at his house and see. It would be droll if I stumbled on an old comrade in this manner,” he added, and glanced up again to the calm and peaceful

house, into which assuredly he would take no pleasant memory or influence if he were to penetrate.

By this time they had come to Farm End, Mr. Grainger's pretty cottage home, and both stopped at the garden gate.

“Adieu monsieur,” then said the stranger bowing with that wonderful bow of his: “I wish you a thousand good mornings, and many thanks for your politeness. I shall see you again I trust, and perhaps in Paris; where I will not let you forget your claim on me for the graceful courtesy you have shown me.”

He put his hand into his breast-pocket and brought out a silver card-case, from which he took a thin, highly-glazed card, with “Mr. Gregory Dysart” printed in the smallest old-English capitals on it, “Rue de la Paix, 15,” in a minute Italian hand in the corner, and at the top, for crest, an armed hand holding a spear piercing a boar’s head.

“That is my Parisian home,” he continued, “where, trust me, I shall be always most happy

to welcome you in remembrance of this pleasant ramble."

"You might as well come in and dine with me as you have come so far," then said Mr. Grainger, his usual wiry circumspection swept away into a very child's credulity by the airy grace and serene self-confidence of the stranger.

"Willingly," said that gentleman: "after you."

And Mr. Patrick Grainger who had seen through the fascinating German baron, and who had never from the first put his trust in Mr. Trelawney, now found himself the host of a passing stranger on the faith of a graceful bow, a few well-planted flatteries, and a highly-glazed card with a crest at the top. To the end of his life he never knew how it was done.

When the pair parted Mr. Dysart had learned the public repute and private history, the assumed incomes, (and your country communities know pretty closely what each member is worth) the political feelings and religious tendencies, the loves and the suspicions of loves, the hatreds and

the friendships of every one in the Vale. He had learned too that Mr. Grainger had a sister married to a M. Delaperrière, banker; at which he had a little winced for just a moment—though for such a moment that Mr. Grainger had seen nothing and would not have understood anything if he had seen it, calmness and reassurance springing up again as swiftly as they had vanished; especially when Mr. Grainger added to his information; “But I have not seen her for twelve years now; I never go over to Paris and she never comes here, so it is not much like having an only sister, hey?”—intimating further that he did not particularly like moossoo her husband. To which the stranger said quietly, he was certainly not a very popular person; he knowing him well by repute though not visiting in the same society.

And besides all this especially did the stranger learn all there was to learn about Mr. Trelawney; how he lived, and how unpopular he had made himself by his pride and reserve, and how full of suspicion every one was of him, and how the Vale

had scented a mystery from the beginning, though never able to catch even the shadow of its shape and name. At which Mr. Dysart had smiled meaningly, though good naturedly, and said;—“Perhaps I could enlighten you on a few doubtful matters if I would.” But when pressed by Mr. Grainger, who, warmed with wine and talk and the crafty but vigorous pumping he had undergone, had forgotten all about his sudden panic in the road, and that fleeting flash of the true face behind the mask, he laughed and shook his forefinger backwards across his face, saying;—

“Honour, my dear sir, honour! I never tell tales out of school. We are all sad sinners in our way, and this poor Jasper” (he pronounced it, Jaspaire) “is no worse perhaps than many another who has been more fortunate and less unpopular.”

“But there really *is* some terrible mystery then?” urged Mr. Grainger.

It was like parting with his life-blood to part with his finger hold on it before he had actually grasped it.

“ Pas de doute,” said the stranger ; “ there is a mystery and a grave one.”

“ About the first Mrs. Trelawney ? ”

“ Yes ; about the first wife,” said Mr. Dysart.

“ He was really married, then ? those two children are legitimate ? ”

“ Mais oui ! mais oui ! ” said Mr. Dysart as if in a tone of surprise. “ The mystery does not lie in that direction at all monsieur,” he then added ; “ and,” laughing, “ you will not get it from me until I have my friend Jasper’s permission to detail it.” With which he rose to take his leave, and Mr. Grainger was forced to let him depart, still burdened with the secret he would have given his right hand to have known.

“ The best day’s draw I have had since poor Lavinia came to Paris with a year’s income in her boot ! ” said Mr. Dysart when he was alone, sticking his hat on one side and brandishing his cane gaily. “ Now for my friend Jasper and *his* new self to-morrow.”

CHAPTER VI.



THE next day Mr. Gregory Dysart set out for Croft. He knew who Mr. Trelawney was, and he knew his power and the man he had to deal with. Perhaps it would be better to say he knew his power because of the man he had to deal with, and how by his very pride he could be brought into submission, and through his sensitiveness induced to suffer.

“ What shall it be ? ” he kept on saying to himself as he walked along the road : “ five ? ten ? twenty ? I wonder if I could frighten him into fifty ? Sapristi ! ” and here he halted suddenly, and looked on the ground considering ; “ I wonder if he ever took the trouble to verify that about Funchal ? Bon Dieu ! is that chance open to me ?

Courage, Gregory!—courage, caution, delicacy, reserve, all that thou hast of useful qualities, and the mines of Potosi may be even now under thy hand! To think of lighting on him at last after my fruitless search of years, and with the folly he has committed delivered up to me—at least in a degree. It all depends now on the chance of his having committed that other greater folly, whether he is delivered up to me entirely or not; whether I am king or only courtier, leader or wheeler. If I have him! if I only have him! catch me letting him slip through my fingers again! No, my fine fellow, not though you buried yourself alive in twenty different dustbins!"

Saying which he struck off the head of a great purple foxglove with his cane, and then went on again gaily. His thoughts were so pleasant that he whistled as he went; and was still whistling when, having passed through the lodge gates turning with the drive through the shrubbery, he came face to face suddenly with the man he had gone to seek—Jasper himself, haughty, self-contained, lordly as ever.

“Ah ! Carthew, mon ami ! te voilà encore !” cried Dysart with a joyous accent, and a supple bending of his body, holding out both his hands as if in the very abandonment of his joy.

At the sound of that clear, ringing voice which he knew too well, at the sight of the dark face meeting his, Jasper started and quivered as a man might who had been struck by a snake ; then he drew himself aside in all his natural haughtiness with disgust superadded.

“ Well, what brings you here, Field ? ” he said folding his arms.

“ Not Field, mon cher !—no longer Field—a vile, plebeian name that never suited well with aristocratic tendencies, did it Carthew ?—but Gregory Dysart at your service. Me voilà in my new dress and at my new abode ; ” and he offered him his small, highly-glazed card with the crest and the coronet at the top, and “ Rue de la Paix ” on the corner, which however Jasper made no movement to take. “ I have a genius for patronymics as you know Jasper, and, un-

fortunately for me, have run through a considerable number of aliases, but I think I have hit on one particularly neat this time : Gregory Dysart," mouthingily. "Sapristi ! I am quite in love with the sound."

"What new villany have you been committing for this ?" said Jasper disdainfully.

"Why you see it is sometimes as convenient to change one's name as to drop an unlucky surname, Mr. Jasper Trelawney Carthew," returned the man who called himself Dysart, laughing : a little insolently perhaps, but always airily, and with an abundance of French "gaillardise" and "bonhomie," two qualities upon which he piqued himself especially.

"And who obliged me to that ?" cried Jasper with a livid lip, "whose scoundrelism blighted my life and tarnished my name ?"

The man shrugged his shoulders ; "That is your own affair," he said ; "the facts of change and suppression are pretty much alike, and the world will make no such fine-drawn distinctions between them, or us."

"It will have to make them," said Jasper disdainfully.

"Oh no!" replied the man carelessly, "it will not, for it will never know them: it will simply know me as your friend Mr. Dysart, for as long a time as it suits me to take breath and study life and ecclesiastical architecture in this hole of yours; and you will go on as Mr. Jasper Trelawney, the mystery about whom is as impenetrable as ever."

"It shall not know you either as my friend or as Mr. Dysart," cried Jasper; "I will be a party to none of your lies and trickeries; I have had too many of them already."

"Very well," said the man in an unconcerned voice, speaking as quietly as if arguing an abstract question of ethics, personal to no one; "suppose then, for argument, that you insist on truth in all its purity, and refuse to recognize me as I desire, but blow my pleasant little summer scheme of peace and respectability to the wind—nothing else Carthew; I assure you on the honour of a gentleman!—what good will it do you?"

“Keep me and the world in which I live free from the pollution of Gregory Field!” said Jasper.

“It will do nothing of the kind; not a bit of it! It will simply tell the men who already doubt you, and suspect you of a vast deal more than necessary, that you have lived here for the last seven years under a false name—at all events not under your true one, which comes to much the same thing; and that you have even married the prize young lady of the place under this false name, which more than one thinks makes a marriage no marriage at all; you are aware of that fact? There now, don’t stamp and frown and look like Faust and Mephistophiles; I am better bred than yourself Carthew, and always avoid ugly nouns and adjectives. Now I ask again; what good would this do to you, old fellow?”

“What are my affairs to you scoundrel?” said Jasper coldly, but it was a coldness like the white heat of steel in a furnace.

“Peste! life is a battle always, and even when not in actual fight a wise man holds himself in an

armed neutrality, so as to be ready at all points and in all circumstances. The fact between us mon cher, is, that you have put yourself in my power by this little faux pas of yours—this dropping your rightful name and living en cachette for so many years ; and I should be a cursed fool if I neglected the opportunity to make good terms for myself out of it. Excuse my frankness ; it is my way you know. So you see I have come up to your house to-day, having heard all about you last night by the merest chance—such a mere chance that, if I were a vain man and thought myself of the slightest importance to Providence, I should say it was providential and what your young curate there would call ordered—and,” planting his feet a little wider apart, and a great deal more firmly than was habitual with him ; “I shall not leave until we have arranged our conditions of mutual alliance and defence.”

“I will hold no terms and enter into no conditions with you,” said Jasper angrily. “ Terms to me from a convicted swindler ! ”

“ Yes, from a convicted swindler at your

service ! But my dear fellow, what is the good of harsh words ? You might have expressed your meaning quite as thoroughly and a good deal more pleasantly by, ‘a gentleman in difficulties,’ or, ‘a victim of the possessive pronouns,’ or, ‘one ignorant of the tax on property.’ Dear ! dear ! you never will learn the *suaviter in modo*, Carthew ! But to our muttons, as you English barbarians say. You will be kind enough to introduce me to your charming wife, and to the society here, as Mr. Gregory Dysart, an old friend and comrade of yours in Paris——”

“Hear me, Field,” interrupted Jasper in a low tone ; “if you dare to come inside my house, or presume to speak to any one belonging to me, I will have you kicked through the place by my servants. I will have no house of mine contaminated by your presence !”

“Bah ! bah ! what child’s play ! You will do just as a sensible man would, Carthew ; unless indeed you have softening of the brain ; which I don’t suppose, to look at you. If you do not choose to make an exception in my favour, and

see much of me *chez vous*—though it would be greatly to the advantage of yourself, let me tell you, living in the wolfish unsociable manner in which you do—bon ! I and the world can understand that; but you will please to endorse me outside, as I have indicated. Come, I will let you off easy; tell only one person, a *vieux ganache*, a Monsieur Grainger, that I am my new self, and I will demand no more. He will be sure to ask you to show his own importance, and how the fine gentleman from Paris singled him out to be his friend; and—you will do as I wish," he said with an insolent assumption.

"If I tell Mr. Grainger anything, it will be that I know you certainly, but as a swindler who has been inside more French prisons than one, and who would be at Toulon at this moment if he had his deserts!"

"Like enough, Carthew; but you see it is Dysart and not desert this time. Ha ! ha ! not a bad pun that ! 'Well,' shrugging his shoulders, "do as you please; but remember you are cutting your own throat while you are merely rapping

my knuckles ; and when you have ruined yourself and your wife and children it will be a very poor consolation to know that you have simply prevented my spending a few months at Clive Vale. You cannot touch me you know, and really now, talking rationally like men of business, you are at my mercy, not I at yours ! For what does it signify to me whether I stay here for a month or two, or amuse myself among the Welsh mountains or by the English lakes ? All one to me ; but to you—surely you are not so mad as to commit social suicide for the sake of a bit of school-boy revenge ! Come now, it is a very simple bargain and a fair one ; and if not quite even, the balance of liberality is to you. You keep my secret which is a mere harmless whim, and I keep yours which is your very social existence : else, where will all this fine place go to ? and my lady ? and les petites ?—where, indeed ? ” he added with emphasis, and looking at Jasper from under his eyebrows. “ Perhaps— ” he stopped, and then said very slowly and with great meaning, “ perhaps a certain glass of old

Madeira could floor it all a little more thoroughly than even *you* know of, Carthew!" and then he watched him keenly.

" Threats are wasted breath to me, you poor pitiful scoundrel!" said Jasper haughtily. But he had blenched for all his imperious voice.

" No they are not, my friend; for those last words of mine struck you, and so the breath was *not* wasted, you see. The fact is Mr. Jasper Carthew, I can touch you on other weak places beside this unlucky burking of your distinctive name; we will not particularise what, this morning. I would only remind you of one thing—and mind, I say this seriously—I know more than you think for and hold you in a tighter vice than you are aware of. Take care I don't put on the screw a little harder yet. Bon! let that caution suffice; a caution that does not touch you so much as it touches that amiable lady your new wife!"

With a stifled curse Jasper sprang upon the man, and twisted his hand in the gay gold-spotted cravat till the mocking face above turned purple, and the breath came only in a gurgle from the

half-strangled throat ; and then he flung him off as he would a reptile, with a kind of passionate abhorrence—but it was a reptile the subtle power of which was an overmatch for his own more declared strength. In the war for ever going on between subtlety and strength, strength unless in itself as subtle must succumb.

“Leave my place ! leave my sight, scoundrel !” he cried white with rage and panting.

“As Mr. Gregory Dysart ?” said the man, with unruffled equanimity, even though he was trembling and scarcely able to articulate from the violence of Jasper’s assault.

“As the devil, if you like ; only get out from my way and from my sight, if you do not wish to be murdered !”

He laughed in his airy manner.

“My sole protector being the gallows !” he said. “By-the-by, Trelawney—you see I am an apt scholar and a man of my word—you have not such a thing as a five-pound note about you, have you ? My last draft on my banker came to grief somehow, and I am deuced hard up. I

have been down on my luck a cruel length of time, so come, be a good fellow, and lend me five pounds to set me on my legs a bit."

"I will give you twenty pounds—I will give you twice twenty—a hundred if you like—if you will leave Clive Vale and swear never to set your foot in it again!" flashed out Jasper suddenly.

"By all means! delighted I am sure, my dear sir!" replied Mr. Dysart with alacrity. "Send it to me this evening, and I give you my word I will be off to-morrow morning; but give me the actual ready for an instalment; a bird in the hand you know," with an impudent leer.

Jasper flung him a bank note which he had in his pocket, and which Mr. Dysart caught before it fell, passing it between his finger and thumb with a rapid but peculiar gesture; and then he thrust it into his waistcoat pocket, whistling.

"*Merci, mon garçon*," he said lifting his hat; "so now all is square between us, and we have made the best of each other. You are Mr. Jasper Trelawney, the best fellow going if un peu trop original for any particular intimacy be-

tween us—wherefore you do not ask me to dine with you to-day ?—and I am Mr. Gregory Dysart, whom you endorse until to-morrow morning ; building a golden bridge for my retreat at that time, cost price one hundred guineas : of which, I have the odd shillings here,” tapping his waistcoat pocket. “ You will send the rest to me to-night at the Blue Bell, will you not ?—and by to-morrow morning this charming little retreat of yours shall behold me no more. I own I should have liked to have seen certain of your household—your amiable lady, and the deux petites of—we will not say whom, hey ? Fie, Carthew—Trelawney I would say—kick the man whose silence you have just paid for ! My talking wearies you ? Adieu then, I will go. Bon voyage mon vieux, et merci ! ”

Saying which, he lifted his hat a couple of inches from his head, waved his hand with jaunty familiarity, tripped a few steps mincingly like a woman, and disappeared through the lodge gates, flinging a shilling to the woman who opened it and whom it was not the Clive Vale fashion to fee.

“A real gentleman that anyhow,” she said to her daughter, curtseying her deepest curtsey.

“A bad bill presented and not dishonoured,” said Mr. Gregory Dysart to himself, as he walked along the road switching off the foxgloves. “By Jove though, what a fool that man is! To think of the creature’s amiable simplicity in believing I would go away to-morrow, and leave the milch-cow that stands bellowing to be milked! I should like to see myself such an ass! Just a shade more courage, just a dash less care for this blasted world, and what it thinks, and what it knows, and Mr. Gregory Dysart would have gone to the wall and Mr. Jasper Trelawney would have had the crown of the causeway to himself. But he has put himself in an awkward position now, what with one thing and another; and he will not get out of it again in a hurry. Evidently he knows nothing of Lavinia, and I have the game in my own hands. Lord! a man can brazen out anything if he has not given hush-money to begin with. That’s the main point to carry; and by Jove, I am not a bad general! Now for Mr.

Grainger, who is to be my godfather here and respond for me to the virtuous society of the place ; and who may thank his stars if his coming lesson in caution does not cost him pretty dear ! ”

That night the Croft groom rode down to the Blue Bell where Mr. Dysart had carried off Mr. Grainger to dinner, and delivered into the new comer’s hands a small, square, brown paper parcel, directed to him in Mr. Trelawney’s handwriting and sealed with his seal.

Mr. Dysart broke the seal, first flinging out half-a-crown to the man through the inn-parlour window, and quietly counted the notes one by one ; Mr. Grainger looking on, all eyes and wondering credulity.

“ Not a bad thing to fall into ! ” then said Mr. Dysart to his guest, laughing as he crushed the notes into his pocket with the unconcern of a man accustomed to deal with large sums. “ I had forgotten this debt which my friend Jasper owed me. Faith, a man with the large monetary transactions that I have at times would scarcely remember a paltry sum like this ! But it seems that

he had always kept it in his remembrance as a thing to be paid off whenever we should meet ; he knew my Paris address though, but that is no matter ; and being in better circumstances now than when I lent him this hundred to save him from arrest, he has repaid me as you see, honourably enough. I should not have troubled him, even if I had remembered it ; but when he broached the matter himself, I said all right, for money never comes amiss to any of us either to play with or to live on. I daresay even you know that Mr. Grainger ? we all do ! ”

Now here was a bit of gossip that Mr. Patrick Grainger had no kind of compunction in detailing ; and so it crept through the Vale with the noiseless tread of slander, growing as it went, that Mr. Trelawney had once been in exceeding difficulties—that he had been arrested and put in prison—that he had taken the benefit of the act and was whitewashed—and that he was not quite clear in his character for honesty ; and the proudest and most scrupulous man in the Vale, whose sensitiveness about debt was almost a weakness, got

an additional handful of mud flung up against him because a swindler had arranged a little plot, and a straight-backed, small-headed gentleman made the most of appearances. And though the only thing to do is to live down slander, and to face detraction when it comes to us in life, still, the mud that is thrown up against us, however unjustly, is never wiped quite clean away till our names get washed in the great waters of death ; sometimes not even then.

The next day Mr. Dysart had installed himself and the one small hand-bag which formed all his luggage—a traveller who knew his art never took more, he said—at Mrs. Makemson's, considered the best lodgings and the best cookery to be had in Clive Vale, and exactly facing the cottage where Aunt Dess and Hannah Marks lived their quiet, modest, nun-like lives. The two houses formed the last of the little village street ; if indeed a scattered row of gardened cottages set face to face could be called a street at all ; and stood on the Old London Road, about a mile from the lodge gates of Croft.

That evening Jasper and Aura were looking over some "reading books" for the children, and among the rest came to De Genlis' Tales of the Castle, with the story of the Palace of Truth at the end; an old edition which had served Jasper in his boyhood, and from the fly leaf and margins of which all the marks and names and dates and New Zealander-like boyish scribbles had been carefully erased; the book, as most of his old books, having been rebound in later years.

"It does no harm to the children to read, because they care only for the story; but what a satire on human nature!" said Aura putting her finger on the title.

Jasper looked at her with a wistful expression in his face.

"And yet how few of us could tell all the truth," he said.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in deprecation, for truth was synonymous with life to her;—as she once said, "I could not tell an untruth if I tried, I think;" and she could not.

“ Do you not think we all have something we hide from each other ? ” he asked.

“ I don’t know , ” she answered doubtfully. “ I can only speak for myself—I have not . ”

“ And would not have under any circumstances ? ”

“ I cannot imagine anything that would make me hide a thought or a fact from you, for instance , ” she answered, taking his hand and doubling it up beneath her chin.

“ But if I should be pained, deeply pained, by knowing any certain circumstance—never mind what now—anything you like ; if it would do no good to tell me—could help me in no way whatever—atone for no evil already done, and avert none that had to come—what would you do then ? ”

“ Well, I don’t know , ” again said Aura ; “ it would come then, I suppose, to a duel between love and conscience, and whether I should—— ”

“ Think first of love and how you could best protect the beloved, or of yourself and how you could best protect your soul ? In fact it would be

a duel between spiritual self-sacrifice and spiritual cowardice."

She laughed a little confusedly.

"Yes, if you like to put it so," she said ; "but the manner of your argument seems sophistical, and, what is not usual with you, warped from the straight line."

"I did not mean it to convey that impression to you," said Jasper. He and Aura always spoke the truth to each other in their discussions, and never quarrelled because they differed in opinion ; which, as I take it, is the rarest proof of love to be had in married life, where an echo is so often mistaken for harmony and individuality is held to be discord. "But on the whole," he continued, "which do you think would win the day ? Love ? by which and for which you would hide anything from me that would simply pain me to know, when no good end was to be gained by my knowing ? or would you care for your soul at the expense of my happiness ? and, so long as you were right in yourself, not regard it as selfishness that you built up your salvation out of the wreck of my life ?"

“I do not think that I should care for myself, soul or body, before you,” said Aura simply. “And yet,” she went on thoughtfully, “ought it not to be that the very fact of caring for one’s soul makes one still more worthy of a noble love? There can be no real love deserving the name without goodness and the earnest striving of the soul after daily improvement. And what goodness is there, what ordinary morality even, without truth? Does not working out our own salvation necessarily include making ourselves worthy of the highest love? and would not the highest love be best won by the noblest life, no matter whether it gave pain or pleasure? Surely those who love the noblest as they best deserve, are those most worthy of receiving back their love in return. And how would they be that if afraid of pain for honour and truth?”

He seemed struck but not cheered by her remark.

“I will put a hypothetical case,” he then said. “Suppose that you had concealed something from me from the beginning—your mother’s dishonour,

your father's shame, your brother's disgrace—something that did not defile you personally but that had defiled your family ; suppose that, in horror at the idea of tarnishing my name by the reflection of the secret disgrace hanging round your own, and in dread of my distress at knowing you less pure in circumstance than I had believed, and in womanly shrinking from the sad exchange of pride in you, and reverence, for the mere pity and compassion that must come were I to know all, you had concealed this hidden shame : well then, Aura, when you got into the Palace of Truth would you not be glad of the talisman to enable you still to keep silence ? ”

He spoke quietly and naturally, tracing out the veins of her hand with his little finger.

“ Yes,” said Aura hastily ; “ for if I had been false to you in the beginning, and had not respected you or myself sufficiently to tell you what you ought to have known, I would still go on in my sin rather than crush out my life in crushing out your love for me, by confessing that I had deceived you. At least, I

fear so," she said, taking up her words again ; " but even then the noblest course would be to confess—to hazard love for the sake of truth. It might live through the trial ; that would depend on its own strength : and if it did, it would be stronger than before, and ennobled because of the very trial."

" Then you think you would love me as much as ever if I confessed to you that I had deceived you ?" asked Jasper, still tracing the veins in her hand.

She looked up at him with a little surprise, and then she put her arms round him and said—

" I cannot answer your question, dear, for I cannot even imagine such a thing as your having deceived me. I suppose I should forgive you—" and she smiled ; " but you know there are certain 'ifs' which go beyond one's power of mind to compass, and any degradation of my ideal in you is one of them."

" And to have deceived you would be this degradation ?" he asked.

“ Why, yes,” she answered simply. “ Could I respect you as much as I do now if I did not think you true ? ”

“ And concealment is untruth ? ”

He spoke unlike his usual self, a little bitterly, and as if wrung by what she said.

“ It may be so : a tacit untruth,” answered Aura gravely. “ It depends on what kind of concealment it is, does it not ? ”

“ Would you make a very fine distinction in my case, on the wrong side and against me ? ” asked Jasper with a certain mocking accent in his voice, that came so often when speaking to others but never before to her.

“ Darling ! do not talk so,” she said earnestly. “ The one stable bit of life to me is my trust in you in all things ; both in what I know and what I do not know. I have learnt to love you Jasper,” she said in a lower voice, “ as one loves God—with perfect trust and without fear ; and it is almost like blasphemy to hear you, even in jest, suppose a baseness of yourself. I should love you Jasper, if you were a murderer ; but,” and she shuddered,

“ let us change the conversation, darling. Oh, my darling ! ” and she flung back her head while still clasping her arms round him, “ I have no real life but in you ! If I were to lose you as you are to me now, my perfect man, I should lose my faith in heaven ! ”

“ I cannot ! I cannot ! ” sighed Jasper, as he took her face between his hands and looked into it mournfully. Then he kissed her forehead and her eyes, and saying “ God keep you ever in the same love, my Aura ! ” rose and left the room. And for the second time that day he shrank from the better way, by the weakening influence of the very love which should have strengthened him to the trial.

CHAPTER VII.



“ MON CHER,—

“ FORGIVE me if I a little alter the conditions of our holy alliance, and re-arrange the terms of our treaty to suit my convenience better than it was suited by the original draft. I now interpret our compact to mean only, that I shall not take it on myself to break through the law of seclusion which is the rule of your household ; though you will pardon me if I say that I think it a rule fraught with as much moral evil as social stupidity, and what I should be justified in refusing to recognize, for the sake of certain members of your household on whom I have a claim. However, passing that by, and

remembering that an Englishman's home is his castle where he may wallop his own nigger as he pleases, if the nigger don't scream so loud as to awake the neighbours (yours does not, I understand), I leave you to yourself and them to themselves [underlined], and let the cloud and the veil envelop you as thickly as you desire. Which, you must allow, is as much generosity as you have any right to expect. Thinking the matter over then, I have come to the conclusion that, if I keep to the outside of the Croft gates, I do all you can reasonably demand of me ; and that I am as free to remain at Clive Vale as yourself, under the general condition of not infringing the law—about which the less said for one of us the better ; and that one is not Gregory Dysart. I will of course maintain the other part of the contract religiously, and give no one a hint as to what I know. I am an honest fellow as you know, Jasper, and a deuced deal too tender-hearted for my own interests ; and a bargain is a bargain, which must be kept among men of honour as among thieves ; else, confess, I could make

superb terms for myself, knowing what I do, and holding you as absolutely in my power as I do. I think this hint will suffice, and that you will quite see the wisdom of my remaining for the summer at least at your charming little retreat, where I shall have friends and society (Mr. Grainger was with me last evening when your man came down with the money so that, you see you *have* endorsed me as I desired, which has removed one difficulty), and where you will be at hand if I am sick or in trouble—as I know that you would not let an old friend come to grief for want of a helping hand to keep him on his legs. For all which reasons I have established myself at your respectable Mrs. Makemson's, where I shall play Strephon to your Corydon, and earn the best character in the world—perhaps better than some one's I could name. It is of no use to object, my Jasper—for I see you knit your brows and prepare for a little gentle objurgation—the lodgings are taken and my billet de route is made out; so your only course, old fellow, is to grin and bear it, as you have borne other things before without

grinning. As you never go into society you will not be annoyed by any chance rencontre with your discarded friend ; and your amiable spouse and the little ladies will not be contaminated—I think that was the word, was it not ?—by meeting a poor, harmless, good-natured devil like myself in the lanes or at the church door, which will comprise the whole of our mutual intercourse. Admire my humility that I can write in this apologetic and explanatory tone to a man who has injured me as you have done, if by nothing else, by his secret flight and crafty concealment for so many years.

“ Adieu ; je te fais mes compliments, mon vieux. Do not pout that I have applied the fable of the wolf and the crane to my own advantage. Each for himself in this world ; a maxim which, I take it, J. T. C. understands as well as any of us.

“ Yours fraternally,

“ GREGORY DYSART.”

“ There ! ” said Gregory to himself, when he had finished, “ there’s as fine a piece of compo-

sition as any one need wish to see, and as neat a handling of his sore places as any gentleman could have! If Jasper were any one but himself this letter would play Old Harry with me ; for there's no denying it, it *is* a trifle insolent ; but when a proud man is down and under your feet, you can give him a sly kick or two in because he is too proud to notice what he cannot revenge. Jasper dare not turn on me for the sake of his wife and children ; for it would not quite suit English notions of respectability if the world were to know that he is living under a false name, because his own is too much stained to be worn in public again! So here goes ; and now for her Majesty's mail ! ”

Few letters came to Croft at any time, for Aura had no correspondents and Jasper almost none ; and what letters did come were common property, though Jasper himself always opened the bag, and so first saw what it contained. For safe as he had thought himself in this remote place, with every trace of his former name and condition destroyed, a man with a secret is never secure, and almost

instinctively adopts habits of precaution guarding the avenues of his life against surprises. This morning he opened the bag as usual, Aura standing over him fondling his face and head ; which was also “as usual” whenever he was employed and she was standing idly by him. She felt him start under her hand ; it was when he took out a letter, the only one they had this morning.

“Did I make a poor thing start ?” she said caressingly with the sublime folly of love ; and then she put her cool fresh hands under his chin, and turned up his face and kissed it. For the first time he met her caress by a look of pain instead of the boyish gladness, the usurer’s interest, with which he generally returned it. He closed his eyes, and his lips were tightly drawn together, while a spasm convulsed his face which was white as the marble bust against the wall.

“Are you ill, my darling ?” she cried, startled at the sudden suffering of his face.

“No,” he said, and he smiled but very sadly ; “yet sometimes your caresses are so exquisite to me, Aura, they almost border on pain. Do you

not know that the extreme of pleasure is pain—the under side of the tapestry?"

She laughed and blushed. Love had not become so ordinary a matter with her that she could receive it with indifference, and her husband's words had still their old power over her, calling up the same sweet bashful emotion and girlish shame as in the days when they were only a lover's words, and in their first fervour and freshness.

"Oh! if it was only that!" she said; and then she hid her face and finished her speech at the same time in a caress. And while she clung to him, while her warm brown hair was falling across his grizzled beard, and her lips were against his cheek, Jasper put the letter he had just received into his pocket: and he felt like a thief, and a forger, and a liar, while he did so. Was the first fruit of this villain's influence to be not only secrecy but absolute deception towards her? Alas! alas! must the serpent for ever enter into Paradise?

"What are the letters to-day?" she then asked quite innocently.

“Nothing of consequence,” answered her husband evasively.

“Now!” and she held up her forefinger, “you are hiding some secret from me! There was a letter, you naughty boy; I saw one; what was it all about? Tell me, sir, or——” some vague and terrible threat implied.

“Nothing that you would care to see, child,” said her husband.

“Well now, if that is not too bad,” she said again, pouting playfully; “and you see all mine!”

She meant nothing but the childish fun of the moment, not caring a straw about the letter, or who it came from, or what it was about; and certainly if she had imagined that Jasper did really wish her not to see it she would not have thought of it again; neither would she have taken it ill; but she believed that he had hidden it from her in play (they often did these silly things together) and that she was only carrying on the joke by pressing it.

But her playfulness grated on her husband,

already irritated and ill at ease, and he answered her sharply—

“ And if you had anything you did not wish to show me, Aura, I would respect your decision and trust your integrity sufficiently not to worry you about it.”

“ Darling ! ” she said, “ I did not think I was annoying you ! I am so sorry ; but I was only in play, and I thought that you had hidden it in fun. You know I would not annoy you, Jasper, for all that the world could give ! ”

But tears had started into her eyes—truly the first that had been in them through his injustice since their marriage.

Lovingly—almost reverently in his great love—her husband kissed them off before they fell, and no more was said between them ; but for all the day after Jasper was sad and pale and restless, and would scarcely let her leave his sight, but hung about her in a manner most unusual, and with a clutching kind of terror lest she should escape him, which Aura could not fail but see. And then she knew that he had a sorrow which

he had not yet asked her to share ; and knowing this, such a subtle tenderness, such a sweetness and delicacy of womanly love interpenetrated all her looks and words and ways, that Jasper felt as men do when their cup of happiness is filled to the brim, that it would be good for him to die now, since the next drops must needs be of bitterness and evil. On her side her only thought was : “ He is unhappy, and I must comfort him ; when he tells me what hurts him I can comfort him better ; but until then I must help him by my love, which will make up for my ignorance.” And so the bright long summer day passed, but Jasper felt as if it had been a long hour of sunset, where he had been watching the great light go down and night and the clouds come on.

It was a day, though full of such infinite love yet full also of such infinite sadness, that even the very children seemed to know a shadow had fallen upon their brightness, and that the sunny warmth of their lives was chilled. “ Poor papa is ill,” they whispered one to the other ;

and the elder two kept the little ones to quiet plays, with that sweet assumption of womanliness—that rose flush before the dawn—which makes a young girl of about twelve or so one of the dearest and loveliest creatures under heaven. It is well for them they do not know how dear and lovely they are !

And indeed poor papa was ill—sick with that terrible sickness of the soul when a man sees all his defence-work destroyed, and the hour of exposure at hand. He had taken the wrong path from the beginning. He had been more sensitive than brave, more proud than self-reliant, more loving than trustful. Had he been proud to the point of indifference, not stopping short at scorn, he would have faced the world, carrying his torn banner and stained shield in the eyes of all men ; he would have kept his rightful name however much disgraced, and have trusted to the purity and nobleness of his own life to redeem it in the time to come. But this scorn of his fellow-men, while it seemed by the superficial expression of look and manner to give him strength and

dominance, in reality weakened him ;—weakened him to such nervelessness of pride that he even condescended to the pitifulness of a disguise, rather than brave the nine days' wonder and contemptuous pity of the crowd. That “these fools”—“these creatures,” as he generally called the Clive Vale people to himself—people over whom he walked as he said, holding terms of equality with none—should have the right to speak slightly of him and his, seemed an indignity he could not endure. He cared nothing for the vague reports afloat, half of which however he did not know ; but the other half which he did know he passed by with his customary disdain, because they were not true and therefore did not hit him between the joints of his armour ; and he took no pains to make himself popular, thus securing friends in a day of need. On the contrary, he took pains to be disliked said many who would have been devoted to him for even an obolus of courtesy ; and he openly expressed his contempt of popular persons, as being the “spiritual counterparts of barbers’ dum-

mies, painted, bewigged, and made up." But all this scornful disdain was substantially mere weakness—the shrinking of the flesh from unpleasant contact—the gentleman's abhorrence of familiarity with the clown; it was not that strong, calm self-reliance which, secure in its own centre, can bear unshaken whatever outside assaults fate, man, or misery may make. And for the sake of this sensitive abhorrence, and for the sake of a love which like all the rest bore the same blemish of pride too great for truth and too small for trust—he had lived a life of concealment for seven long years, and had even entrenched on the sin of deception.

And now the day of retribution was at hand; and Jasper Trelawney, the haughtiest man living, found himself the creature of a convicted swindler, the mere tool of a scoundrel who had the power to insult and prey upon him: all for that fatal fear in the dress of pride which made him afraid to face his difficulty, afraid to grasp his nettle and with one vigorous wrench root it out for

ever from his life. If he had, how much would have been spared !

It was of no use to notice the man's letter. That he intended to plant himself as an enduring thorn, and that his silence would have to be perpetually repurchased, the Master of Croft knew too well. For how long it was to be borne, and what was to be the end, depended simply on the amount of his rapacity, and whether he would have conduct and caution enough not to so overweight the balance that exposure would be preferable to his exactions. Partners in disgrace and lies, it was perhaps natural that the needy one between them should seek to be a partner also in the means by which he might hide and escape from the consequences of his disgrace. Jasper was a man of the world and could reason out his position calmly enough ; but, with the self-torturing faculty of the sensitive, he placed his Shame in the fullest glare of his thoughts, and turned the knife in his own wounds dexterously. He never spared the hard word for himself or

for others ; and the scorn which he showered on others he accepted for himself. If this man—this Dysart—was a swindler whose company no gentleman should keep, in what position was he by whose connivance the rogue had gained a footing in the Clive Vale world ? He might sneer and jibe at “these fools” as much as he liked, but at least they were honourable men and innocent women ; and yet by his help they had opened their doors to a common thief twice sentenced in the police courts, and at this moment (he was sure of that) away in hiding from the consequences of some later villainy. What was he to do ? Denounce him, and so open the flood-gates of disgrace which all these years he had kept closed ?—denounce him, and be henceforth known as a man who had lived under a false name—some of whose children were tainted in their birth ; whilst others, and Aura ?—God ! if the terror of that villain’s vague word was true ! What was he to do ? to go back or to go forward seemed equally perilous and ruinous.

And then a wild thought came over him—that

haunting vision of flight, and peace in flight, which mocks the unhappy man and lures on the guilty one—that vision which we all have when the fight is hard and the burden heavy, and we catch a glimpse of the quiet valley to the side where we should be safe and at rest could we but reach it. Wretched dreamers that we are!—surely, surely, is there no rest for any of us save by fighting through to the end! That scheme of flight from the battle-field—of giving up the day's toil before the evening—of escape from the consequences of our own acts—we all have it; but when we would attempt it, we find it a mere delusion, and impossible. There is no going back in life, as Jasper once said. The foes we left behind us on the height will find us out in the valley; our past will dog us like our shadow and blacken the threshold of our new homestead; and all that we shall have got will have been the loss of ground and foothold, and the need of painfully making our way back to the position we relinquished. Had not Jasper found this out already? Had he not proved the worthlessness of flight

before? He had fled from his disgrace, from his name, from his former life, and had they not all found him out here?—while he was now less able to meet them than he was at the beginning, and weighted too with a heavier burden. Surely he had experienced the folly of escape too bitterly to think of it again!

And yet, when Aura was leaning against him that evening as they sat together on the sofa, looking at the great white moon in her circle of rainbow-edged clouds, he drew her to him, and said half below his breath—

“Wife, how would it sound to you if I proposed that we should leave Clive Vale for ever?”

She started, for the question came abruptly, and the subtle influences of the day had a little unnerved her. “How?” she repeated, looking up into his face; but immediately after she threw one arm across his breast, laying her hand on his shoulder, and said tenderly; “anywhere in the world, Jasper, with you would be home to me!”

“Would you regret it?” he said, holding her hand upon his shoulder with one of his.

“For myself individually, without reference to you, yes; I should regret leaving my father and mother, of course; and this dear dear place; and Clive Vale; and all the old people I have known all my life; but I should not regret anything, as your wife, that was your pleasure to do, or that made you happier. ‘Whither thou goest I will go, where thou diest I will die, and there I will be buried,’ ” she repeated in a lower voice.

“Then you do really trust me, Aura?” he cried, with the feverish look and convulsive grasp which had come so often during the day.

“Trust you?” she said in a little astonishment. “Do I not love you? and are not love and trust the same things? Could I love you if I doubted you?”

“And you would be firm? Would nothing win you from me? would nothing tear you away, Aura? Aura, would you stand faithful to the very death?”

“ Win me from you, Jasper? No! death would tear me away, and only death; but nothing could win me from you, and nothing but death or your own desire could divide us.”

“ I have been putting foolish questions,” said Jasper with a forced laugh, wiping his upper lip; “ but there are times, Aura, when a sorrow-haunted man doubts of everything; when the shadows of the past come so thick upon him that he almost loses his hold on the present, and when his very happiness seems like an unsubstantial dream—just a little time of rest before a fresh wave closes over him. All my life long I have been followed by sorrow as by a ghost; and it is following me yet.” He shuddered as he spoke, and glanced round the room, almost as if he expected to see his Fear in bodily form; and while he spoke the noise of wheels and the clatter of horses’ hoofs was heard upon the road below the meadow, and Mr. Grainger and Mr. Dysart drove by on their way from the country town to the village.

“ If it comes it must be met, bravely and patiently,” said Aura softly; “ you will not bear

it alone, husband, and sorrow shared by love is sorrow more than half lightened ; and then those gracious words, Jasper : ‘ They whom God loveth he chasteneth ’—how often do I think of them when I see the distress and anguish of men ! And surely are they true ; for sorrow is the great purifier of the world—the fire which burns away the dross. The Agony and the Crucifixion came before the Ascension,’ she added very tenderly ; “ and the Cross which One bore is laid upon us all.”

He kissed her but was silent ; and it was characteristic of Aura’s love for him, and of the quality of her own nature too, that although she saw he was oppressed and had something hidden from her which he was debating within himself whether he should confess or not, yet she never pressed him to tell her what it was, nor put the smallest question to him, directly or indirectly. Her love was love for him, not love for herself masked by personal liking, which is what nine-tenths of that which passes current in the world for love really is ; and that he should do his own will and go his own way in all matters relating to himself, was

simply one of the conditions of that love. As it was also with him to her; the recognition of the freedom and individuality of the beloved being everywhere a quality of noble love, as tyranny and Griseldadom are of the ignoble.

CHAPTER VIII.

So Mr. Grainger was now the declared godfather of the last new comer. He was with him everywhere, riding, walking, rowing on the small sheet of water they chose to call a lake in those parts, but which to the dwellers by real lakes was simply a good-sized pond ; he offered him the hospitality of his pew on Sunday—Mr. Dysart generally dining at Farm End afterwards ; and the intimacy between them was altogether of a very frank and decided character. For, by the strange illogicality of country places when the question is one of private feelings, Mr. Trelawney, though not able to assure his own position, could yet float any one else down the stream by the mere fact of his confessed acquaintance ; unpopularity and doubts as to

private history and personal morality being quite different things to doubts of a man's social status, and the consequent quality of his friends. And as Mr. Dysart was undeniably a most delightful companion—clever, bright, airy, complaisant, well-mannered, and with a marvellous faculty for reading his world—his way was clear before him so soon as it was known that he was socially “safe,” being the friend of that “proud, unpleasant, insolent Mr. Trelawney.”

And he deserved a little praise truly, for the quickness with which he saw, almost at a glance, what he might do and what he might not, in this new world into which he had been so unexpectedly cast ; what would go down in the matter of opinion, and what would be too hazardous for any one short of a duke to attempt—and he must be an English duke, and of irreproachable character ; what tone to take with each individual, and how to flatter special weaknesses. His insight into all this bordered upon genius, and involved no little personal repression as well. Indeed the man never knew what natural expansiveness was, and

never for one moment lived unconsciously or for other than a purpose ; he never knew what it was not to be on the alert and watching ; never took off his mask, and never forgot his part. He had qualities in him—that clever, convicted swindler—which, turned to decent ends and with only an ordinary amount of honesty, would have carried him to the top of the tree, instead of landing him, as now, on a rotten branch very low down, and swinging over a fathomless abyss. At present though, it was all sunshine and prosperity with him, and he forgot the insecurity of his foothold, and the abyss lying beneath. He was evidently in a lucky vein, he said to himself ; Providence had taken a fancy to him ; and who knows ?—he might become fortune's favourite after all, and turn the corner cleverly. There might be a pretty little certainty to be worked out of Clive Vale, and perhaps the chance of an honest settlement like Jasper Trelawney's ; at all events the thing was worth trying for, and the chance was just enough to give zest and occasion to his self-restraint and careful acting.

The party-giving teetotum had stopped at Mrs. Price. It was her turn now, Miss Mason having come last, and the Miss Campbells and their papa before, and if she was not quick about it she knew by certain masonic signs, well understood in a small community, that Mrs. Escott would get before her, and take the wind out of her sails and the gilt off her gingerbread by being the first to engage Mr. Grainger's aristocratic-looking friend of the spiral moustaches and patent leather boots. So she translated will into action with rather more energy than was usual in Clive Vale ; and sent out her invitations after only a week's consultation with cook and her two daughters. It generally took a fortnight or three weeks to get fairly under weigh.

“ How tiresome ! ” said Mrs. Escott when she received the invitation—

“ Dear Mrs. Escott.—Will you and the Rector give us the pleasure of your company on Wednesday next, at seven o'clock, to meet a few friends who have kindly consented to take tea with me that evening ? It will give me much pleasure to

include you both among the number.—Believe me, my dear Mrs. Escott, very sincerely yours, Zillah Price ;” which was Mrs. Price’s invariable formula to every one on all occasions, simply changing the name.

“ How very provoking ! ” she said again.

“ What’s the matter, my dear ? ” asked the good-humoured Rector tranquilly.

“ Why, that stupid Mrs. Price has gone and given a party for next Wednesday ! ” said Mrs. Escott indignantly ; “ and I wanted one for Thursday, and have just ordered the chickens and tongue from Brownlow. What a fussy, interfering woman she is ! —she is always doing something disagreeable.”

“ So she is,” chimed in the Rector. He knew better than to attempt the exhibition of emollients just then.

“ I’ve a great mind not to go, that I have ! ” cried Mrs. Escott sitting to her desk ; for the man was in the kitchen waiting for an answer.

“ I should not, my dear, if you did not like ! ” said the Rector.

“La papa, how can you be so ridiculous ? ” snapped out the lady. “Why, how can they make up a whist table without you and me ? As if I would be so ill-natured as to spoil her party like that indeed ! ”

“I did not know ; I thought you said you would not go, my dear,” replied the Rector humbly.

“Don’t be so silly,” said Mrs. Escott ; “you take up every word I say as if I was on my oath. And pray let me manage my little matters myself.”

Saying which she turned to her work, and wrote off a rather florid letter of thanks and acceptance, adding a supplementary flourish about the peculiar agreeableness of Mrs. Price’s parties, and with how much pleasure she and the Rector looked forward to them, &c. &c. But the only effect which her blandishments had on Mrs. Price, was to make her say grimly :

“Mrs. Escott had intended to give a party then ! If she was not annoyed about something she would not be so full of flattery.”

Mrs. Price had rather a brilliant gathering. The Clive Vale world thought it much if they got

all of themselves together without any unfortunate hiatus, which would sometimes happen ; but to get all of themselves and any stranger superadded was a “double first” scoring countless honours. The drawing-room at the Hollies too was not of an overwhelming number of square feet, so that a party of nineteen, as they were to-night, filled it to quite a west-end air of repletion. First, there were the three ladies of the house ; Mrs. Price, in her severe weeds which she still wore—being one of the women to whom the insignia of widowhood express in some mysterious way both moral favour and spiritual safety—and she was one of those tall, bony, and rather masculine-looking women who seem to take up twice as much room as any one else, though she wore no crinoline ; and her two daughters in their lavender silks—new this year—like supporters to her arms ; then there were the four Miss Campbells and their papa ; Myssie and Lotty in pink silk much adorned with black lace, in faint imitation of the Spanish *cachuca* dress, and the younger two in white muslin, but with differently-coloured trimmings—

Kate with her favourite yellow warmed up to maize to-night, and Ellen with scarlet. And as they were young ladies who wore a great deal of trimming, broad sashes, and long full shoulder-knots, and great pompons in their bosoms if not bunches of flowers, and generous wreaths in their hair, they made quite a grand show, and dressed the room like four full-blown and very pretty tulips. They were certainly very pretty girls, and very agreeable and good-natured. After them came the Rector and Mrs. Escott; she in a Stuart-tartan kind of satin, gorgeous and showy, with one of Miss Fitton's "fashion" caps—a very splendid affair, with a great deal of gold twist and some wonderful bugle trimming about it, and a little scarlet feather playfully meandering in among a bed of roses; so she was bright enough, and looked resplendent under the lamp. Then there was Miss Mason in her well-known "shot" of purple and yellow, which gave her a shimmery uncertain kind of look, favourable to pictorial effect. Mr. and Mrs. Mountain did not count for much in the adorning of the room, for he was thick set, and ill dressed

in a crumpled shirt-front frayed at the edges, and she was in her eternal black silk, which was the only dress she had, poor soul ; besides her cold was bad to-night, and she looked harassed and unwell. Then came Major Morgan, erect, military, melancholy, grim, but "quite the gentleman;" Dr. Hale, handsome, swaggering, flashy, vulgar, in one of his marvellous waistcoats of purple satin and gold thread ; Harry Grant, handsome, manly, and not vulgar ; Mr. Bennet, in the mood which turns the wine of life to vinegar and curdles all the milk of human kindness ; and after him stole in aunt Dess and Hannah Marks, quiet, amiable, gentle, the one in the silver-grey silk bought to the knowledge of the Vale five years ago, and which looked as fresh as if new on to-night, and the other in the high and scanty worked white muslin with the short waist, about which was some tradition of its having once been one of the young princess's, filtering through the ranks until it alighted on dear little Hannah's quaint, quiet back. And then later in the evening, so late that Mrs. Price had begun to be uneasy and to

calculate on spoilt coffee and leathery tea-cakes, came in Mr. Patrick Grainger accompanied by Mr. Gregory Dysart.

A flutter ran round the room ; every one ceased talking ; even Mr. Bennet dropped the thread of his discourse on Dr. Cumming's last book which he was holding with Major Morgan ; and Harry Grant himself, for all that he was in love, left off looking at Miss Ellen and turned his eyes upon the new arrival instead.

“Allow me to introduce Mr. Gregory Dysart of Paris to you, Mrs. Price,” said Mr. Patrick Grainger with an indescribable air of subdued excitement and importance ; “a friend of mine, and of Mr. Trelawney’s,” he added as the clincher.

“I am very happy to see you, Mr. Dysart,” said Mrs. Price ; “my daughters”—Miss Zillah and Miss Sara bowed from their places ; and Miss Zillah, obeying the glance which telegraphed the order, shortly after stole out of the room and told Betsy and Bella to bring in the tea. “You have not been long in the Vale ?” she then said,

making room for him to sit beside her on the sofa.

“ Not very long, madame,” returned Mr. Dysart bowing gracefully as he took the place indicated, glancing sharply round the room as he did so.

“ I hope you do not find us very dull,” she then said a little awkwardly, and feeling that she herself was not specially brilliant at this moment: for conversation in a room so silent as this had become was rather difficult to Mrs. Price, who had never too large a store of small amenities, even under cover of a general buzz.

“ On the contrary, madame, I have quite fallen in love with your charming retreat,” said Mr. Dysart in his clear voice and singularly neat pronunciation. “ To a man a little fatigued with active life a short residence at such a paradise is like the most delicious sleep: one would have to be careful, however, that one’s lotus-eating did not continue too long,” he added smiling.

“ Lotus-eating! bless the man, what does he mean?” thought Mrs. Price. “ Yes,” she answered aloud, a little vaguely.

“ But you would say that there are duties here as everywhere else,” continued Mr. Dysart ; “ and that with the sufferings and wants of the poorer children of the great family, we may all find work enough and to spare.”

“ Certainly, certainly : very well said,” cried Mrs. Price briskly.

She was on her own ground now and knew where to have him.

“ I knew this was what you would say, madame,” returned Mr. Dysart with an almost imperceptible bow. “ Characters soon become known in small communities, and the reports I have heard of madame made me able to assume her sentiments ; ” again smiling.

“ I am sure you are very kind,” said Mrs. Price flattered, and cast a pleased look on Mr. Grainger, whom she would not have credited with any very energetic commendation of her works and ways in general ; for Mr. Grainger was of the quiet-going Escott sect, and did not particularly affect Mr. Bennet and his lambs.

“ My friend Grainger has pretty well posted me

up by now," returned Mr. Dysart; " and I own, by his delineations has completed the fascination which the material features of the Vale have exerted on me. In such a country, and with such a society, I cannot conceive of a happier life!"

" I hope then that we shall keep you for a long time," observed Mrs. Price graciously.

" Merci," said Mr. Dysart; " I also."

Then the door burst open and Betsy and Bella came in with a clang: the one bearing a great tray full of tea and coffee, the other, one of cakes and biscuits, Sally Lunns, girdle-cakes, and bread and butter cut thin and rolled up in small rolly-pollys: and in the universal clatter between silver spoons and China ware, and the sugar-tongs for ever falling off the sugar on to the tray, that then set in, the general conversation recommenced, and Mrs. Price effected an introduction between Mr. and Mrs. Escott and the stranger without much observation supervening.

As the evening wore on, Mr. Dysart was presented to every one in turn, even to aunt

Dess and Hannah Marks, both of whom he had recognized from the first as the ladies who lived “en face,” and whose harmless lives he had more than once watched from behind the green and yellow damask curtains of Mrs. Makemson’s parlour; for, never knowing when any secret might not turn up which would give him some power over the lives and pockets of his neighbours, he was an adept at spying, and let no opportunity for secret information pass with any one. But at this moment more important matters were on foot than that of winning ladies’ hearts, or spending his time in fascinating “la petite blondine,” as he called Miss Hannah; so, after speaking to them for a few minutes in his usual gracious if rather highly-coloured manner, he left them to angle for bigger prey.

Mr. Dysart was perfectly aware of that variation in social manners which makes the woman’s favour all important in the towns, but the husband’s and father’s the thing to be secured in the country. He knew that in the towns for a man to get the character of a lady-killer in any of its

stages, from simple philandering to rankest Don Juanism, is but an additional help up the social ladder—a kind of moral kicking upstairs if you will, but still it is upstairs—while in the country, let him only be suspected of such tendencies, and in a very short time he will find the bolt drawn and the chain up at every door against him. So, as he had his spurs to win at Clive Vale, and his reputation to make, he cultivated the gentlemen to-night, and was content to simply offer himself to the admiration of the ladies: which was enough he thought for the first.

He, Mr. Grainger, Major Morgan, and Mr. Mountain, were all standing in a group near the fireplace; Mr. Bennet not far off, but not making one of the party directly—only indirectly by the quality of good hearing. Mr. and Mrs. Escott, Mr. Campbell, and Miss Mason, were playing whist; Mr. Dysart having refused; giving as his reason a rather tragic story of how he had once played unlimited loo, where a young fellow who seemed to have plenty of cash and who played with reckless courage was bled rather freely;

“but still he took his punishment so jauntily,” said Mr. Dysart, “no one suspected he was staking his very means of existence. But so it was ; the unhappy young man played and lost, and played and lost, till he had finally lost his all, and then he withdrew from the pavilion—it was at the Duc de Lavalette’s one summer, when they were all spending the season at Pau with the Empress—and blew out his brains. Fortunately for his, Dysart’s, conscience he too had lost—a mere trifle, not above twenty pounds or so” (they played long whist at penny points at Clive Vale, and round games for sugarplums and nuts); “but would you believe it sir, I was so touched at the unhappy fate of this youth that I have never turned a card since! I do not say,” he added smiling, “that I am under any vow not to do so ; and your innocent kind of play is another matter altogether ; but not to-night, thank you. I will play with pleasure when I am absolutely required to make up the table.” Wherefore he stood out, and talked to the gentlemen instead.

“You know Mr. Trelawney, I believe ?” said

Major Morgan, striking the key-note with a bold hand.

Mr. Dysart bowed. "I know him very well," he said.

"At Paris?"

"Yes, at Paris."

"Was he always as unsociable as he is here?" asked Mr. Grainger, not unwilling to draw his friend out on the subject.

"Ma foi, yes!" laughed Mr. Dysart. "He went by the name of the Wolf in our set because of his gloomy habits. I used to try and get him into more rational ways, but to no good. He was always as sullen and gloomy as if he was meditating a conspiracy. I often told him the Emperor would be afraid of him if I were to take him to the Tuileries."

What a light, airy, pleasant little manner he had! How simply he talked of his high friends and grand position! — not in the least degree ostentatiously, but quite naturally, and as a matter of course. Really a fascinating man, worth some trouble to know!

"We are not over-pleased with him here," observed Major Morgan severely.

"So I can conceive," replied the other quietly.

"A man living under a cloud, and with confessedly a mystery about him, is never a pleasant acquisition to a neighbourhood," put in Mr. Mountain; "one never knows where to have him, or what may not turn up."

"Work for you gentlemen of the long robe, hey?" laughed Mr. Dysart. "No! no! come now, my friend Jasper is not so bad as that!" in a joking kind of depreciation. "He has had great sorrows and much misfortune, and I do not deny that he has committed a few grave indiscretions, but nothing so bad as that, 'pon my soul!"

"You know his history then?" asked Mr. Mountain, his eyes twinkling as he thought of his eight children and scanty cupboard, with perhaps some pretty little pickings to be had out of the great Trelawney Mystery if it could but be run to earth.

"I should think I did!" said Mr. Dysart in

a rather high-pitched voice ; “thoroughly—too thoroughly,” lowering it.

“ And what *is* this cloud, this mystery, hanging round him ? ” said Major Morgan. “ It would be an immense relief if we only knew ! ”

“ I daresay so,” replied Mr. Dysart ; “ but it is impossible that I can tell you, my dear sir. To be sure I am under no bond of secrecy to my friend Jasper—but coming here and finding that he has so carefully effaced all traces of his former life from you all, and that he has even married and settled among you, keeping still his secret unrevealed—confess now, it would be scarcely noble if I were to tell what I know, because chance has brought me across his path again ! Poor Jasper ! ” he added in a musing tone, as if forgetting his company and thinking only of the past scene, “ never shall I forget that day ! I never in my life saw a fellow so knocked down as he was when it all came out ! He could not stand against it at all ; for he has no real pluck in him—your haughty men never have when they have to face the world—and I give you my word, sir, he cried

like a schoolboy when I went into his apartment; floored, fairly floored he was! I offered to do what I could, of course, and he put himself into my hands unreservedly. You can conceive what an opportunity a mess like that offered to an energetic fellow like me, Grainger?" he continued, turning to that gentleman as easily as if he had known him twenty years; "I put my shoulder to the wheel in real earnest, and after immense difficulty pulled him through, as you see. But the thing was much talked of in Paris, and the poor fellow naturally came in for some hard words; and was told, I believe, by our ambassador that he had better leave. I won't vouch for the truth of this, but I gathered as much from her ladyship. He was more blamed than he deserved—we always are when we are off the hooks—but I own too that he had done very wrong, and did richly deserve his knuckles rapped. Ma foi, though! we none of us know our own weakness till we are tried, and who can say whose turn to slip it may not be next? Poor Jasper Trelawney! he has sinned, and he has suffered."

“ And is not repentant,” said Mr. Bennet openly joining the group.

Mr. Dysart shrugged his shoulders.

“ Que sais-je, moi ? ” he answered. “ ‘ Judge not, and ye shall not be condemned,’ hey ? ”

“ I hope your views are sounder than your memory,” retorted Mr. Bennet a little insolently. “ Your meaning may be good, sir, but your quotation is not quite so exact as I should like to hear,” —in the tone and manner of the Sunday-school teacher, reprimanding.

“ The spirit is before the letter all the world over,” returned Mr. Dysart with infinite good humour; “ and in this instance I claim to have shown more of the spirit of Christian charity than monsieur here; though, as becomes his cloth—is indeed the value of his income—he knows his texts the better.”

The curate felt the sneer in spite of the good humour, and said irritably,—

“ And there is such a thing as false charity, Mr. Dysart; and consenting unto sin; which makes one a partaker in the sin of the sinner.”

“ Quite true, sir ; but as I did not consent to my friend Jasper’s sin, but on the contrary drew him out of it, your words do not apply to me,” answered Mr. Gregory Dysart tranquilly.

“ And yet touching pitch defiles the heedless handler,” said Mr. Bennet ; and his face lightened up as one who thinks he has said a good thing, with a “ beat that ” kind of look upon it.

“ I don’t think, Mr. Bennet, that you know much about the matter at all,” said Mr. Grainger, in a pet at his friend’s unceremonious handling. “ The pulpit is the place for you to take us to task from, and not when we meet as gentlemen together in a lady’s drawing-room. Besides, these matters are not for a gentleman of your profession to discuss at all ; you ought to leave them to us men of the world.”

“ The mission of the preacher is to insist in season and out of season,” said Mr. Bennet with a wrathful glance.

“ Oh, bother ! ” cried Patrick Grainger ; “ I cannot stand any of that now ; once a week is quite often enough for any man ! ” and turned

away to the three younger Miss Campbells playing spillikins “en quartette”— said Mr. Dysart— Hannah Marks being the fourth, with Harry Grant to score ; which to tell the truth he did very dishonestly, always marking up Miss Ellen at a tremendous figure whether she lost or won, which Kate, perceiving, indicated to her sister by treading on her toes beneath the table : whereat both young ladies giggled, and Ellen blushed in addition.

As these little sparrings were by no means infrequent between Mr. Bennet and Mr. Grainger no one noticed them ; it was only “Mr. Bennet and Mr. Grainger at it again” when they began, and people took care to keep out of the way, to avoid being drawn into the discussion and so forced to take sides ; but no one gave them a second thought, and they did not radically affect the intercourse which was never very cordial. Indeed, the great Trelawney question absorbed all the rest, and left no time or thought for smaller frays. Who cares to catch minnows when he has the chance of landing a salmon ? Had it not been for this, however, there would

have been a Bennet and Grainger feud in the Vale long ago, which would have shaken society to its foundations, and divided the place into two parties: as actually came to pass in the after-days, when that same Trelawney question became more prominent.

To-night, though, of all the nights in the year Mr. Grainger was not disposed to accept Mr. Bennet's preachments as he phrased it; and therefore answered him with thrice his usual acerbity. A fussy, small-headed gentleman who has just achieved a social success and made himself conspicuous, is not likely to be very amenable to clerical dogmatism, especially if it is only the curate's and comes in the very flush and on the scene of his triumph; and Mr. Bennet ought to have known him better than to have attempted it.

“But once a week seems not quite often enough, Mr. Grainger, to judge by appearances,” said the curate;—he was a very woman for the last word.

“Mind your own business, Mr. Bennet, and leave me to mind mine,” quoth Grainger savagely; and the quarrel might have risen high, had not

fortunately the card-party come to an end ; and as all rose at once loudly discussing their tricks and their winnings, the voices of the rest of the company were drowned and the channel of talk was diverted.

Mr. Bennet, who took out a great deal of revenge in that way, indemnified himself for his enforced silence under Mr. Grainger's snubbing by a tremendous sermon next Sunday afternoon, taking the story of Jeroboam and the man of God at the altar for his text, and making such unmistakable allusions to Mr. Grainger in his remarks concerning the disrespect of the unconverted laity to the cloth, that the Miss Campbells looked at each other and tittered, and even Mrs. Price thought him a "little too personal." But Mr. Grainger ostentatiously went to sleep, as he used sometimes in the afternoon when particularly bored by Mr. Bennet's sermons, and so blunted the point of the arrow cleverly.

What Mr. Dysart said of Mr. Trelawney made a great sensation among the gentlemen ; and many and ingenious were the conjectures as to

what his hints implied, and what was the “mess” and “exposure” alluded to. The favourite idea was, that it was some disgraceful gambling or betting transaction (Mr. Grainger did once just mention “forgery”) wherein Mr. Trelawney had wanted to cheat, but was prevented. “The same kind of thing was told of the notorious Lord X. when I was a young man about town,” said Mr. Patrick; and that was the time, of course, when Mr. Dysart had lent him money to prevent his exposure and arrest, though he delicately refused to give any leading facts; but it was something of the kind no doubt, even if they were out in a few unimportant data. They made up a pretty little story among themselves, which however did not seem to come to much, for it was one in which the ladies did not share—was only a man’s view of the matter—and, save the formless generality of “something dishonourable about money which Mr. Dysart knew of Mr. Trelawney,” the thing never rose to the surface as a matter for popular discussion. But it did quite as much harm as if it had; for there are two kinds of slander—

the rooting slander and the floating; the one making little stir for the moment but sinking deep into the future, the other like scum on the water driving hither and thither, a filthy mass which all men see and speculate on, but which dies away in the evening because of its very unfixedness. All the thousand definite and exact stories about Mr. Trelawney, rife at various times in the Vale, had been floating slanders unrooted in any demonstrable fact, therefore unfixed and unfruitful; but this vagueness of the new comer had fibres and a firm foot-hold, and so struck down its roots into the minds of men, and grew and flourished vigorously if silently, as is the way with things that are to live. It was the first actual tangibility they had got hold of—the first step in the scale of evidence; the words were as shadowy as ghosts in the moonlight, but the fact that a pleasant-mannered gentleman had once known Mr. Jasper Trelawney, and had known some evil of him, was as stable as the granite rocks on the hills. It was a formless slander, but it had roots—the first that had; and it was

the law of nature that it should bear fruit in the future.

All of which Mr. Dysart understood as well as he understood the mysteries of hausse and baisse, or of rouge et noir ; knowing indeed the exact force and angle and point and aim to give to his “elf arrows”—his shapeless insinuations and formless slanders.

When the party broke up that evening there was not, apparently, so popular a person in the Vale as Mr. Dysart. Every one was full of his praises, save Major Morgan who was silent, and Mr. Bennet who doubted his soundness ; and, what was rather a significant fact, Dr. Hale and Harry Grant. And they both spoke of him slightly to their fair companions as they all walked home together in the moonlight. (The Vale always walked home from its parties : the pleasantest time of the evening according to the young people.) But then Mr. Dysart, understanding the small social value of these two gentlemen, had not troubled himself to pay them much attention. Their verdict might have been different if he had.

And yet I think not with Harry, who had the honest youth's instinctive perception of a varnished scamp.

"I can't say that I think great shakes of him myself," said Dr. Hale to Miss Kate, whose arm he had secured for the walk home in spite of that offer made and refused two years ago. "But then you see, Miss Kate, we medical men as students see a rum lot in our time, and get our eye-teeth cut sooner than your country gentlemen who never look behind the scenes."

A vague kind of dread made Harry more reserved in his expressions; but Miss Ellen finally drew from him his not strikingly profound opinion: "I cannot say why, Miss Ellen, but I don't like him."

"Because you are jealous of him," said Ellen maliciously, peeping up at him from under her hat.

To which made Harry answer to her horror—she not wishing to bring matters to a crisis because papa would never consent to a long engagement—"Have I cause Miss Ellen?" squeezing her hand

against his side as he spoke, and looking into her face tenderly.

Reply was fortunately impossible, for at that moment they came up to sister Kate and her cavalier—Kate wilfully lingering, fighting with her golosh, having on her a more than usually strong fit of disgust for the young doctor that night; scarcely to be wondered at, seeing the contrast that had just been offered to her; and the creature's impertinent criticism indeed!—so the forces coalesced and all walked up to the door together, and no more love-making was possible to handsome Harry Grant for that night. Not that he would have committed himself: he loved that naughty teasing girl too much to lose her by precipitancy, and he intended too firmly to win her before the game of life was out, to be rash and boyish in his ventures.

“I wish he had a little money,” sighed Miss Ellen as she let down her glossy ringlets, and thought of that unmistakable squeeze in the moonlight. “He is very nice, if he had only something to live on!”

And Harry echoed the sigh from the dreary depth of his bachelor apartments in the centre of the dull little village.

Mr. Dysart was at his own door when aunt Dess and Hannah Marks came up alone ; they never had an escort. He lifted his hat to them as they went in at the little wicket gate, and said, “ Bon soir, mesdames,” cheerily across the road ; adding, “ What a glorious night ! ” and then a moment after, “ I am sorry I did not know you were alone, I would have volunteered my poor protection.”

“ Good night sir,” answered the gentle voice of the elder lady ; but Hannah blushed and turned away troubled, though it was only in the grey moonlight, and said “ Oh, aunty ! ” below her breath, as if they were all doing something reprehensible.

To the cloistered nun the gardener is a man ; to the uncloistered nun of English remote country life the meaningless gallantries of a man of the world are equal in exciting power to the “ declarations ” of one of their own set ; and this simple

act or rather word of courtesy fluttered “la petite blondine” as much as if Harry Grant or Dr. Hale had formally demanded her in marriage of aunt Dess.

“I see it all now,” said Mr. Gregory Field, flinging himself a little wearily into the chair by courtesy called easy, of which poor Mrs. Makemson made so great account when she ran over the advantages of her lodgings; “but it is a deuced dry lot, too, and I don’t quite see what lay I am to go upon to get a little excitement out of them. Jasper is the bread and butter, but who is to be the wine? First, there’s that handsome young bumpkin, that Grant, in love with the pretty brunette Ellen, and she with him, under reserve; shall I spoil his game and cut him out? The thing’s easy enough with all four. Then there’s that other handsome bumpkin—but he’s a cockney not a bumpkin—Dr. Hale, he is in love with Miss Kate and she not with him; Miss Lotty, and that good-tempered one, Myssie, as they call her, are both swainless: for the last, at thirty that is natural, and I do not

think that I shall disturb her dreams; at least not by my own active energies; the passiveness of a man like me goes quite far enough in a country place like this. The two cream-coloured Miss Hollybushes would both give their ears for that conceited ass, the young parson; and he knows this, and feeds them with hope administered in alternate doses; but they would equally marry le vieux ganache Grainger, or that saturnine and ridiculous major. Mes voisines are heart-whole and fancy-free, and la petite blondine is a bécasse, and not worth a thought, pauvre petite!—but the one thing I cannot understand is, how did Carthew get hold of the Rector's daughter? She's worth any man's money if you like! I wonder what story he told them of his past,—what account he gave of himself and of the little brats, who I should say were a trifle awkward to him. I will make a point of worming out the whole story when I dine at the Rectory, for I know of course they will ask me to dinner. That old muff is to call to-morrow, and so I am safe there. Courage Gregory mon ami! your foot is in the stirrup now, and if you

have only ordinary luck, houp-lâ! you will be over the barriers in no time!" Upon which the new favourite of Clive Vale lighted his cigar, and with a tumbler of very stiff brandy-and-water by his side practised various cuts and shuffles with a pack of cards he had in a drawer: just to keep his hand in.

"Scarcely worth the trouble here," he yawned. "I dare not carry that sail; except indeed just at the last, before the whole thing bursts up. Still it is well to be armed at all points; one never knows when the occasion may not arrive."

CHAPTER IX.

CLIVE VALE was a slanderous, ill-natured little place, but it had its few exceptions, and not quite every one joined in the cry or formed part of the quarry. And among these few exceptions, as safe from ill-natured remarks made on themselves as they were guiltless of making them on others, were Decima Marks and her niece Hannah. Indeed, the most ingenious weaver of social fiction would have been puzzled to know on what part of their lives or characters to found either libel or romance, so quiet were they and so blameless. To be sure, Hannah was a little laughed at for her excessive shyness and old-maidish manner of dress; but these were not very damaging social sins; while aunt Dess escaped even this

small detraction ; for her gentle manner and quiet ways, and her unvarying costume of soft grey and white, had nothing in them that was ridiculous and much that was beautiful even to the Vale ; which comprehended neither aesthetics nor art.

The Vale took much credit to itself for Christian humility in patronising as equals, in a way, the two Marks ladies. For the relatives of a deceased coal merchant who had *not* made his fortune were a little below the ordinary standard, held to be at its lowest when a country solicitor's articled clerk, and a vulgar young doctor who misused his h's, were admitted into the higher penetralia. But in this instance the Vale considered it lost no real delicacy by the association, and even gained a higher moral elevation.

Aunt Dess was one of those women to be sometimes met with in remote country places, who at fifty are more innocent and ignorant of life than many a town-girl at eighteen, and whose whole sum of practical experiences is not equal in value to the lessons learnt in one London season. She had never been out of England—only once to

London, for a fortnight—for a month once to Scarborough for her brother's health—and on little visits of a week or two at a time to a cousin she had near Corston ; she had never had a lover, nor an offer of marriage ; and she had never been in love, at least not so much so as to be aware of it herself—so that it could not have gone very deep whatever there might have been. Certainly, she might have felt a gentle preference for the society of one young man over that of another some thirty years ago ; and she might have treasured a traditional remembrance that such and such a person—a grandfather by now—seemed to like her the best when they were all young together, and that if it had not been for Mary Jane Smith's leaving school just when she did, it might have come to something ; also, there was a vague kind of belief in her family generally that Lord Grandio's eldest son had admired her the most of any one in the room at a certain famous county ball to which she had been invited when with her cousin at Corston, the only ball to which she ever went ; but this was the extent of aunt Dess's experience

of life and love, and deeper than into these harmless eddies the great whirlpool never drew her.

But the life denied its natural issue must find outlet in a substitute, good or bad according to circumstance. Aunt Dess found hers in the care of little Hannah, her brother's motherless child, who became to her like her own—thus fulfilling her maternal instinct; while as his housekeeper, she attained that other great end of civilized woman, and was as much “mistress of a house” as the best married matron among them all.

When Laurence Marks died, the two women were left alone like two solitary doves; but the dovecot was very safe and very quiet, and the Vale made a point of looking after the inmates, as an additional chain and padlock against danger. They became in a manner the humble friends and pets of the place; exalted into equality as the reward of their merit, truly; but let it be distinctly understood, exalted as a new-made peer by the grace of his sovereign, and not claiming by inheritance or right. To do generously out of the fulness of your own grace is quite another thing

to the recognition of inherent right; and so the Misses Marks understood.

The life which aunt Dess had lived bid fair to be repeated in Hannah who now nearly twenty looked about sixteen, and who up to these days had been, what Gregory said, as heart-whole and fancy-free as when she was a baby in the cradle. There was no one indeed with whom she could very well manage to fall in love; for Harry Grant, who might have been dangerous perhaps, was occupied elsewhere; Dr. Hale was smitten with Miss Kate; Mr. Bennet did not take her fancy; and Major Morgan and Mr. Grainger were both too old and too "high" for her; so she lived undisturbed, and did not regret the loss of what she did not know. A fair, small creature was she, with a pretty childish figure (in her scanty white petticoat with the low close body and short sleeves she looked quite like a little girl) which would have been exceedingly attractive had she understood the art of dress only so much as a South Sea islander, but which she hid, when she did not distort, under such clumsily arranged

shawls huddled in heavy rucks round her throat, in such badly fitting jackets and quaint, old-maidish scarves and neckerchiefs—besides wearing such hideous bonnets with great full caps inside, into which she would as soon have thought of placing a bird of paradise at once as the simplest artificial flower—that she might have been next door to deformity for all that any one could see. That she had a slight and supple waist, round, tiny, dainty shoulders, and that the satin smoothness of her neck was in itself a beauty which would have made a town girl's fortune, was known in a vague manner by the Vale ; but Hannah cared nothing for any beauty she possessed, and scarcely knew whether she was tall or short, dark or fair, or indeed what manner of womanly being she had at all. She was unawakened yet to herself, and knew no more of coquetry than she did of love. Timid and sensitive, with a world of romance in her unfathomed by herself and undreamt of by any one else, she passed her outward life in one calm round of simple duties enlivened by a few girlish pleasures ; while weaving for her inner joy

dreams of Rome and Venice and Athens and Switzerland ; sometimes her reveries carrying her as far as Egypt, and sometimes to the Brazilian forests ; her stunted life taking visions of foreign travel as its makeweight of compensation. But in none of all her dreams—when she saw herself standing in the Colosseum by moonlight with the eternal procession of priests passing before her ; when she was watching the sunrise flush upon Mont Blanc, or listening to the Spanish muleteer's bright song—in none of all her dreams was there ever mixed up even the first faint sketch of a lover.

She was clever was this shy little maid ; but in that ungrounded irregular manner of country girls who have not been taken about “for the benefit of masters,” and whose knowledge is self-acquired. She could draw a little, but stiffly, and her colouring was something between a tea-board and a chromo-lithograph ; but she was passionately fond of the art, and went up to heaven when once inside her paint-box. She could read classical French very fluently, and modern French too, if

you did not give her anything of modern colloquialism, or with Parisian slang intermixed ; but if she tried to speak it, she broke down ignominiously, and never got beyond the first half-dozen words pronounced with a broad English accent ; she could not play or sing, neither could she dance ; but she was as much of a German as she was a French scholar ; she was a good historian and a good arithmetician ; and she was a botanist, and knew all about the wild flowers and the ferns (which are more difficult) and about birds too, and their eggs and their nests. For in the days of her first girlhood she had been something of a tomboy, and had put aunt Dess to many an hour of shame by her torn skirts and soaked shoes. Those days had gone now—the knowledge gained in them only remaining ; and Hannah's wild oats being sown she had settled down into the quietest and primmest little maiden in the place ; a thorough little “old maid” people called her even at twenty, and were not far out. The Misses Price were prim enough, but that was from exclusion and because they were better

than other people ; Hannah was prim from timidity, and because she was afraid of becoming worse than other people ; the one was self-complacency in righteousness, reading the parable of the pharisee and the publican upside down ; the other was fear of the unknown evil.

Aura Trelawney was aunt Dess's favourite, as a young girl is the favourite of an older woman who has watched her grow up from her cradle ; but she was little Hannah's ideal. She loved her with that enthusiasm which is seen in the love of certain younger women of a lower station in society, and of a smaller calibre, for one higher, older, and stronger in nature than themselves ; a love that needed only a kind word on the Sundays when they met at the church door, a basket or two of choice flowers and fruit in the summer time, a friendly little call with the children, and half-an-hour's pleasant chat about books and pictures and wild flowers, four or five times in the year, to keep always at the highest point, and with its girlish freshness untarnished. For all this was felt by both aunt and niece to be condescension,

as well as sweetness and sympathy: marriage changing a woman's condition either for advance or retrogression, even if she remains at her own old home and among the friends of her childhood. And Aura as Mrs. Trelawney of Croft, the wife of the richest man for miles round—the wife too of the proudest, and one who gave himself more airs than a lord—was a more worshipful kind of creature, even to Hannah to whom she had always been worshipful and unattainable, than when she was only Miss Escott the Rector's daughter, and like one of themselves.

But since Mr. Dysart's establishment at Mrs. Makemson's, the quiet of Hannah's life was gone, and “the strange gentleman” seemed as if he would become an insupportable nuisance to the two doves. Their privacy was at an end; for whatever they did he saw them, and they knew that he saw them; though indeed for the matter of that they did not know all he did see, for he watched them secretly as well as openly, till he found out there was nothing to be got by it; and then he watched them from mere idleness. For some days

after he came Hannah had gone on in her old way with perfect unconsciousness; watering her flowers for instance as usual, and with the same unconcern as usual, not giving the stranger a thought —why should she? But when, unluckily for her peace, she one day caught sight of Gregory's dark face at the window watching her, and when the day after Mrs. Price's party he nodded to her from over the way, calling out in that graceful, airy manner of his; “*Bon jour, mademoiselle!* you are a careful tender of flowers, I see; *une bonne et belle jardinière,*” then all possibility of continuing her pleasant occupation was gone, and she delegated her office to aunt Dess whom it bored, and who got just as nervous over it as herself.

Henceforth her life became a mental whirlwind to Hannah. Whatever she did she did in trepidation lest she should hear that clear-toned voice again calling to her like a friend of twenty years' standing, and see the glittering eyes and the smooth, smiling, *débonnaire* face turned radiant upon her. Those eyes and that face fairly haunted her, seeming to penetrate every room as if always

fixed upon her, and never leaving her even in her dreams. She used to start sometimes and look round suddenly, as if expecting to see Mr. Dysart behind her; and though she had always been neat and tidy she became more so now than ever; and when she had made the pastry or ironed the "fine things" (for aunt Dess kept only one servant, so that all the lighter parts of the household work fell to her and Hannah) took especial care to be quite unexceptionable again before she ventured upstairs and past the hall-door, which according to the Clive Vale habit generally stood open, as did the windows. Mr. Dysart was never out of the eyes of both aunt and niece. They were always meeting him wherever they went. When they went out, and when they came in, there was Mr. Dysart on his door-step ready with his gracious greetings and supplementary flourishes; and unless they had been half idiots, as well as childishly innocent, they could not fail but see that two-thirds at least of these chance meetings were by no chance at all.

But the intimacy did not grow into anything

domestic or admitted. Aunt Dess knew her place and the sacredness of her charge too well to ask him into the house ; which was what Gregory wanted ; partly out of pique because he was excluded like the rest of the unmarried male world, and partly because he disliked solitude, as a man of his character naturally would ; and not daring to go for company in the village below his assumed self, he threw away as much diplomacy to effect an entrance into that quiet old-maidish house as if he would have found there—all he sought. Pleasant and courteous as he was when he was with them, how they would have stared if they had heard his hot words when aunt Dess in her innocence quietly defeated some of his manœuvres, and bid him “good morning,” with her hand on the garden gate, not in the least aware that he had been scheming for the last half-hour to be taken into the interior with her niece and her reticule. Once he went so far as to open the gate for them, and to knock at the bright green door beyond, stopping midway on the little gravel walk to notice the pretty

bordering of cottage flowers—double daisies, sweet alysson, and others of the same class so seldom seen now in cultivated gardens—but even that advanced him in nothing; for aunt Dess only expressed her regret that he should have given himself such unnecessary trouble, and said “Good morning sir,” at the end, in just the same sweet placid tone as ever.

Mr. Gregory Dysart saw then that “his little game was no go,” as he elegantly expressed himself *in petto*; and called aunt Dess an “old cat” to that confidential self to whom he so often talked, as do we all.

CHAPTER X.

NOT long after Mrs. Price's memorable evening, Hannah was out alone; she had gone to High Cross Moor, botanizing, and when she was coming home by the Lower Road, who should she see but the ubiquitous Mr. Dysart with his hat very much over his eyes, sitting on the parapet wall of the High Cross bridge smoking a cigar. He could see Croft from where he sat, for the bridge just caught the house in flank and took in the end of the east terrace walk; and he was fond of watching Croft, as the tiger is fond of watching the lair of an antelope. He felt like its master and as if Jasper existed there simply by his sufferance; and the thought was pleasant to him and helped him;

it even helped him to bear his envy with less bitterness and active evil resulting than might have been.

When Hannah saw that much-dreaded neighbour of theirs sitting smoking on the bridge, she started back as if he had been a ghost, and with scarcely more pleasurable feelings. To meet a gentleman alone in the lanes, and a gentleman too who was not of their own set like Harry Grant or Dr. Hale, and to whom she would have to speak—and Mr. Gregory Dysart of all the men in the Vale—if the earth would have opened and swallowed her alive, she would have been thankful. For a moment she had serious thoughts of running back and hiding herself somewhere in the bogs or the woods or among the stinging nettles, until he had gone; and, but that he had seen her, she most likely would have done something of the kind, for she was quite frightened enough for any amount of folly.

When she came near to the bridge—which she did walking very quickly but something after a crab fashion, with her shoulders turned towards him and her face towards the hedge into which

she pretended to be looking with entire absorption, while her shawl and petticoats caught in the brambles at every step because she had shrunk so closely into it to get the farthest possible from Mr. Dysart—Gregory jumped off the parapet, lifting his hat with his French bow.

“ Well met mademoiselle,” he said gallantly. “ My morning’s stroll has brought me a very grateful pleasure ! ”

Hannah did not answer ; she made her awkward little curtsey, which her confusion rendered ten times more awkward than ever, and hurried on.

“ I saw you pass the bridge not so very long ago,” said Gregory, keeping up with her. “ Where have you been, if I may ask ? ”

“ To High Cross woods,” said Hannah after a pause, scarcely able to speak ; for this was the first time in her whole young life that she had found herself walking with a gentleman, and alone.

“ Ah ! and what to do there ? May I, without indiscretion ? ” said Gregory, quietly taking the basket from her hand and lifting the fronds ; stopping while he did so, thus constraining the

poor little frightened maid to stop likewise.
“Ah, I see ; a botanist ?” he then asked.

“Oh no !” said Hannah confusedly ; “I know only very few,” and held out her hand for the basket.

“Ta, ta !” he said waving his forefinger backwards before his face. “I make a point of never believing what modest young ladies say of themselves. Confess now Miss Anna, you have been guilty of a falsehood !” He called her Anna, not Hannah, and accented the An with a broad A.

“Oh !” exclaimed Hannah, to whom the charge had an awful sound—the flavour of a reprobate in it, even though playfully made.

“Oh yes ! come, now, I will convict you ; no, you need not set off again at your wild speed ; I positively cannot keep up with you, Miss Anna ; you walk like one of the Indian Tatars !”

“Aunt Dess is waiting for me,” stammered Hannah.

“Fib the second !” laughed Mr. Dysart ; “she is not waiting for you ; you do not have tea till six, and,” taking out his pretty little Palais Royal watch —the Vale had never seen such a watch—“it is not

five yet, so that you need not go Tatar fashion for another three-quarters of an hour good. Come and sit down with me on the bridge, and tell me the names of your flowers."

"Oh no! if you please I must not," cried the girl shrinking into the hedge.

"How frightened you look!" said Mr. Dysart looking down into her face; "do you think I shall hurt you, Miss Anna?" in a tone which expressed a certain pain at her want of confidence in him.

"No," she said, "but——"

"But you are a timid little child, and think it very shocking to be speaking to an old fellow like me—old enough to be your father—without aunt Dess at your elbow. That is it, is it not?"

"Yes," said Hannah ingenuously.

"Well, never mind now; I will not eat you indeed! but just wait half a moment more, and tell me the name of this flower; I particularly wish to know it: what is it?" and he held up a pretty little starry yellow flower.

"That? that is wood loose-strife," answered Hannah shyly.

“ Ah, I do not understand the English names
What is the botanical term if you please ? ”

She blushed till the tears came into her eyes, but she was brought to bay and could not help herself.

“ *Lysimachia nemorum*,” she said, with a false accent and the ugly English pronunciation.

“ Of course ! of course ! I know now,” said Mr. Dysart—he did really happen to know that one special flower—“ *chasse-bosse*, or *souci d'eau*, as we call it.”

Hannah looked up with her face all lightened. Save *marguerite*, *resèda*, *violette*, *muguet*, and a few others which every one knows, she was quite unacquainted with the familiar names of flowers in French, and this little ember of learning carelessly tossed off the great burning pile with which she credited Mr. Dysart arrested and interested her at once ; which her companion saw and made the most of.

“ And this ? ” he asked again.

“ Nettle-leaved bell-flower,” said Hannah.

“ The scientific name ? ”

“ *Campanula trachelium*—throatwort,” she said ; and then very timidly she asked ; “ what is it in French, sir ? ”

“ Oh, the same ; ” said Mr. Dysart carelessly, “ little bell : stay, it has another name too,” he suddenly remembered—“ *gant de notre dame*, our lady’s glove—so it has. Now it is your turn. What is this ? ”

“ *Corn-cockle*—*agrostemma githago*—a very late specimen,” said Hannah more at her ease ; but she dared not ask him any more, and Mr. Dysart did not volunteer.

He put her through her paces for the rest, appearing to be profoundly interested in all she said ; and by the time she had got half through her basket, she had lost her self-consciousness and with it her fear, quite “ taken away,” as she told aunt Dess, by her subject. Then warming with her talk she told him where they all grew, which she called their habitat ; and what soil they liked ; and whether they were limestone plants, or peat-bog plants, or sandy ones, or preferring clay, or the moisture of the woods, or the sunny open

bank; and all this while she was standing in the middle of the road alone with Mr. Dysart—a piece of boldness which, if any one had told her two hours ago she could have committed, she would have cried for shame at being supposed capable of.

Gregory, true to his habit of never letting slip any opportunity for learning what might turn into useful knowledge, took down her words carefully; and when she had done he repeated the names again and again, and then asked her to give him the flowers “as a lesson.” She might keep the ferns, he said, the distinctions of which were too minute for so young a scholar as himself; but before he left the Vale, he hoped that he should have coaxed Miss Anna out of so many botanical lessons that he would have learnt even them.

As botany was the forte of the Clive Vale ladies, the interview with Hannah Marks began another section of Gregory’s popularity; for he was so quick, and with the accurate memory of one who has to be constantly mindful of pitfalls, that he soon learnt the names of the ordinary flowers, adding to the general fund of knowledge what

the fair botanists were all delighted to know, a few names in French and some in Italian. For, though he was a rogue and a convicted swindler, he was a tolerably well-educated man like any other gentleman's son; the gentleman there used simply in the conventional not the moral sense. When he met the Miss Campbells at the Rectory dinner the next day, and joined them in their walk the day after, he was quite delightful with all he had to say about the flowers, or as he expressed himself “the Clive Vale flora;” and by a judicious use of what Hannah had told him, and a clever adaptation of what they themselves told him, left on them the impression that he was a real botanist and understood the matter thoroughly. So much so indeed, that in a discussion which arose in the evening between Kate and Myssie, as to whether a certain minute weed was one kind of “penny-cress” or another kind, they both exclaimed in a breath—

“We will ask Mr. Dysart the next time we see him!”

“Did I not tell you that you were fibbing?” then

said Mr. Dysart, giving the basket into Hannah's hand, which he lightly pressed. "You denied that you were a botanist—here are forty flowers and no end of ferns, and you know the names of all, both ordinary and scientific."

"But knowing the names of a few common flowers is not being a botanist," returned Hannah; "and now I think I must go home if you please," she added, making her little curtsey.

"Certainly; I will accompany you," answered Mr. Gregory Dysart quietly, and offered his arm.

"No I thank you," said Hannah looking very much as if she could have cried. "I think I had better walk by myself, if you please."

"What a timid little thing you are!" laughed Mr. Dysart; "am I an ogre or a Blue Beard? and are you Fatima in the castle tower? Well, if you will not, you shall walk alone if you like; and I will only take care of you and see that nothing harms you."

"Oh, nothing can come to harm one at Clive Vale!" said Hannah; "and it is a pity to take you out of your way."

“Not at all! not at all!” said Mr. Gregory Dysart condescendingly. “I might as well walk home with you as anywhere else. It is getting about my dinner-time, as it is your tea-time; so we can go to our meals comfortably together.”

There was no help for it; she was in his power; and a lamb might as well argue with a wolf, or a dove try conclusions with a hawk, as little Hannah try to shake off Mr. Dysart now that he had fastened upon her.

As they were going, he keeping close to the poor child, talking incessantly and it must be owned talking both amusingly and well, they met a family party which, of all in the world, Hannah would have most carefully avoided under her present conditions. It was Aura and her children, laden with ferns and wild flowers, carrying some in baskets, some in bunches, some in bright-coloured wreaths and pendants in their hats, while—it was Julia who had done this—even old Greycoat’s headstall was starred and bedecked like the rest. It was the whole Croft family save Jasper; and a lovely group they made. Aura was walking

by the side of the donkey, in one pannier of which sat the big, blue-eyed, boy-baby, while the other was balanced by books and dolls when little Miss Tiny, the three-year-old Aura, chose to walk and not to ride. A short distance in advance of the rest were Julia and Mabel, two dark-eyed, graceful girls, darker and more supple than the rest, and looking the very types of girlish grace in their white worked frocks, light coloured boots, and broad straw hats smothered in bindweed and black bryony leaves ; after them rushed Dotty always in a state of breathless excitement about something, and who in his grey knickerbockers of which he was immensely proud, and scarlet Garibaldian shirt, with the sunlight catching his golden hair, was picturesque enough for an artist's model ; little Tiny like a bush rosebud done up in pink and white, trotted at her mother's heels, indignantly spurning the offer of Miss Tunstall's hand and disdaining to be coaxed into familiarity. Miss Tunstall was the governess, young and pretty and a gentlewoman with good manners, not of the Bond order at all ; and she walked a little behind

Aura, making love to Tiny who repulsed her, shaking her shoulders and saying “Na ! na !” The fresh, bright-faced servant-girl led the donkey, and the big, black hound scampered here and there at pleasure, sniffing in the hedges after birds and rats while they went peeping after flowers and ferns.

The Trelawney party all looked with amazement at Hannah and Mr. Dysart ; but they looked chiefly at him. Of course ; who does not look at a stranger in the country ? The servant leading the way glanced at him shyly and at Miss Hannah reprovingly ; the elder two children stared with open eyes, but smiled to their friend who was too frightened and troubled to stop them ; Dotty stood with his hands in his knickerbocker pockets, and seemed on the point of speaking ;—he was one of those broad-browed, curly-headed little scamps who fear nothing and are as bold as tame swans—a child whom nurses call a “ regular boy ” and a “ tyrant ” when he is in long clothes ; but Tiny, who was shy and apt to be cross, put one fat finger into her rose-red mouth and clung to her mother’s dress as they passed.

When they had gone a little way the two girls looked back, their large black eyes very wide open ; and Miss Tunstall reproved them but cast her own eyes in the same direction for all that. The dog sniffed at Mr. Dysart's heels, and looked up into his face as if inquiring of his condition, but passed by Miss Hannah unnoticed. Aura gave a natural glance to the one while smiling kindly to the other ; and when Gregory lifted his hat she acknowledged the salute with courtesy, though by no means cordially. And then they all turned up the lane, and the clear young voices and merry bursts of careless laughter which had been hushed while they passed the two, rang out again as naturally as ever.

But Hannah was miserable, and it was as much as she could do to help crying outright. Very silly of her doubtless ; but then shy girls living a retired life in the country are silly, and not to be judged by the ordinary canons of town-made common sense.

“ You know Mrs. Trelawney then ? ” asked Gregory when they had passed.

“ Yes,” said Hannah.

“ You know that her husband is a friend of mine ? ”

“ Some one told me so at Mrs. Price’s,” answered Hannah.

“ And you know him too, of course ? ”

“ A little,” she said.

“ Not well ? ”

“ Oh, no ! no one does.”

“ And like him ? ”

“ I do not dislike him,” Hannah answered reservedly ; “ he has never been unkind to me, but he is very proud and one does not get on with him.”

“ It would be a wonder if you did with any one,” thought Gregory suppressing a yawn. “ Are you as much afraid of him as you are of me ? ” he asked with a friendly smile.

“ Oh dear, no ! ” she said ingenuously.

“ Perhaps then it is your own fault that you do not get on better with him,” he said. “ He may think that you do not like him, as I do.”

“ I do not dislike him, or——” then Hannah stopped, and her face grew scarlet.

Gregory smiled again, and drew one of the feathery fronds of a lady-fern lightly across his face.

“*Merci, chère enfant!*” he said; and Hannah felt that it would have been a gracious dispensation had she been born dumb, so that her unlucky tongue could not have led her into mischief. “Now tell me about this Mrs. Trelawney,” he said; “I am curious to know all about her.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” said Hannah.

“Well, in the first place she is beautiful, is she not?”

“Oh yes!” the girl cried eagerly. “I think her the most beautiful lady I have ever seen!”

“Why, you little enthusiast, how you brighten up! You so love her, then?”

“Better than any one in the world except my aunt,” said Hannah almost solemnly.

“She is clever too, I understand?”

“Oh, very clever! she knows everything; she is quite clever enough to write a book if she chose.”

Again Mr. Gregory smiled.

“ And some who write books are not so very clever, ma petite amie,” he answered. “ In fact, one of the dullest fellows I ever came across was one of your most celebrated authors. I will not say his name for that would be ill-natured ; and I hate ill-nature.”

“ So do I,” said Hannah, “ and Clive Vale is so ill-natured.”

“ So I should suppose,” said Master Gregory carelessly. “ The Trelawneys’ is a very happy marriage, I understand ? ” he went on questioning, “ and she loves her husband to idolatry ? ”

“ I believe so,” said Hannah gravely.

“ Yet knows of all the hard things said of him ? ”

“ I cannot tell, I am sure,” she returned under her breath.

“ But did she not know what was said before she married ? ”

“ Yes, I believe so ; but indeed, if you please, I would rather not talk of it,” answered Hannah distressed. “ Aunt and I never have, and we do not even to each other. It cannot be true all that

is said of Mr. Trelawney, and Clive Vale is such a bad place for talk ! ”

“ I do not care about *him*,” said Gregory, “ it is the lady I am anxious about. You see, Miss Anna, Mr. Trelawney was once my friend, but he injured me deeply and has never forgiven me since ; and never will. We can pardon those who have injured us, as I have pardoned him frankly, and would shake hands with him this instant as if nothing had happened ; but when we ourselves have done the wrong—diantre—that is quite another thing ! And because my friend Jasper once grossly wronged me, he has quarrelled with me, and refuses me admittance to his house ; so that I cannot go up and see the lady for myself, which I should like to do. But I am anxious about her for her own sake, pauvre dame, all the same ; and if you knew all you would understand why.”

“ That is not right of Mr. Trelawney,” said Hannah.

“ No ! it is not too noble of him ! ” replied Mr. Gregory tranquilly ; “ but, que voulez-vous ?

We men of the world get used to hard treatment, and if we do not break our hearts at starting, learn to bear no end of wrong without flinching. If I were to tell you my history, Miss Anna, I should make you weep with compassion ; for all that you do not care about me, and I dare say think me a great bore and an insufferable fellow ! ”

“ Oh ! Mr. Dysart ! ” cried little Hannah softened ; and then she said in a lower voice, “ I am sure I am very sorry that you have been unhappy.”

“ Thank you, mon enfant,” said Gregory, graciously. “ Tell me, Miss Anna,” he continued, “ do you often go to Croft ? ”

“ No, not often—only once or twice a year, just to call.”

“ Not oftener ? ” in a tone of surprise.

“ No ; Mr. Trelawney does not like people to go to the house, so Mrs. Trelawney comes to us instead.”

“ When shall you see her again ? ”

“ I don’t know, I’m sure,” a little wistfully.

“ Could you give her a letter, do you think, unknown to her husband, if I were to ask you ? ”

inquired Mr. Dysart, glancing out of the corner of his eye at his companion.

“ Oh, no ! ” cried Hannah, and shrank back with an instinctive gesture. “ Aunt would not let me do such a thing, I am sure.”

“ And you could not do it secretly for *my* sake ? ” asked Mr. Dysart.

“ I could keep nothing secret from aunt Dess,” said Hannah, shaking her head.

“ Nothing ? ” with a sly glance. “ Would you tell aunt Dess if—if I for instance made love to you—would you tell her that ? ”

“ Oh please Mr. Dysart, do not ! ” said Hannah.

“ No, I am not going to,” said Mr. Dysart quietly; and again the tears came into Hannah’s eyes from vexation, to think of how she had a second time laid herself open to be misunderstood by Mr. Dysart, who in the game of wits was so much too keen for her, poor child !

This last misadventure brought them to the village, when Gregory, who did not care to have it said that he was “ making up ” to Miss Hannah

Marks—which he knew would be said by every one and as universally believed in, if he were seen walking “down town” with her—suddenly bethought him of Mr. Grainger and that he had something very important to communicate to him; so stopping short he held out his hand, saying—

“I will release you now, Miss Anna; I know that I have annoyed you horribly by walking with you, but the temptation was too great to resist. There are temptations you know which we cannot resist”—retaining her hand, and gently pressing it while he spoke.

“Good-by, sir,” said Hannah; and released herself in such a state of excitement and bewilderment as she had never been in before, almost running down the village in her eagerness to get home and unburden her conscience by telling aunt Dess all about it.

When the Croft party got home, the children swarmed up to papa superintending some workmen in the copse where he was making a new garden, all wild about their ferns and flowers, for

they had found the "holly fern," and he was a treasure because of his rarity, and marked the day with white ; and when they had shown him what they had—all talking at once and at the top of their voices, as is right and proper for children to do and just as right and proper for their elders to prevent, if they can ;—when the baby had kicked himself nearly out of the basket with his frantic efforts to become an independent member of society—when Tiny had been "carried to London and back again" on papa's shoulders, and Dotty made happy for life by a new alder whistle which papa had cut for him while he was away—when Mabel and Julia had been petted and praised for their gatherings, and had told all about the wonderful beetles and flies and birds and funguses they had seen —then suddenly remembering they burst out with the stranger they had met walking with Hannah Marks on the road—one of the greatest events of the day to some of them ; that mysterious stranger who had been two or three times to church in Mr. Grainger's pew, and who filled

their young minds with wonder at his unusual dress —chiefly his hat and boots. And they told how he bowed to mamma, and Dotty said “he bowed funny,” and not like papa ; and Julia and Mabel said “he stared so ;” and even the little one lisped “Tiny frightened,” in the tone in which she used to say, “Poor, poor,” when she stroked papa’s whiskers or the cat.

But while they prattled, Aura looking at her husband, saw that his face had changed from its usual quiet sadness to an expression of scorn and hatred she had never seen in it before ; a sudden flaming up of active passion not often seen with Jasper Trelawney or any other haughty nature. Then he said to her, walking a little apart while the children all streamed into the house—

“I know something of that man, Aura ; avoid him ; he is a scoundrel and here for no good.”

“I did not like his appearance,” replied Aura, “and have not from the first. I was sorry to see dear little Hannah with him ; she is such a child, and so thoroughly ignorant of the world, that one would wish to be very careful for her.”

Jasper looked troubled; then he flashed out with—

“She ought to know better, little fool! What business has she to be walking alone with any gentleman at all, especially one she can know so little of as this fellow?”

“I will scold her when I see her,” said Aura; “and tell her that I think her excessively imprudent. I dare say she will not do it again when she knows that I do not consider him a fit person for her to be with.”

Dear, beantiful Aura! she forgot the imperiousness of her own love six years ago, and of how little importance to her was the displeasure or the hard words either, of the whole Vale—father and mother included! We always forget these things in ourselves, or give them another name, when warning our youngers against the dangers we once ran and revelled in.

The subject dropped—Jasper going back to his men and Aura into the house—just for a moment wondering as she went why her husband had not told her he knew about this man when she and

the children had mentioned his being at church three weeks or so ago—wondering only, not suspicious nor displeased.

As she went into the house the footman brought her a note. It was from Mrs. Escott, and ran thus:—

“MY DEAR AURA,—

“I AM going to ask you and Mr. Trelawney to do me a kindness, which I trust you will not refuse; at least I *particularly* hope that *you* will not do so. We are going to have a small dinner-party to-morrow for the purpose of showing a little attention to your husband’s *old friend*, Mr. Dysart, whom Mr. Grainger introduced to us at Mrs. Price’s last week, and we want you *very much* to come. It will be showing Mr. Dysart only proper attention, as I dare say you have not had him up to Croft, your husband is so *odd* in such things; and besides, it will gratify your father and me. I *have* said that I would never ask you again, having been so often *annoyed* and I may say *insulted* by your constant refusals; but

this is a *particular occasion*, and I will overlook all that you have done to annoy me in this way, if you will only do as I ask you *this* time. With kind regards to Mr. Trelawney, in which the Rector of course joins,

Believe me, my dear Aura,

“ Your affectionate mother,

“ LAURA ESCOTT.”

“ P.S.—Kiss the dear children for me. Has baby got his tooth through yet? I hope they are all well, and have you tried Spain’s teething powders I sent you? I dare say not; have you lost them? for if not, and you are not going to use them, I should like them for Sally Younghusband, whose little boy is teething, and I know they are *very good*, and what I used to give you and your brother. We dine at the old hour, half-past six, and mind you come *nice*.”

This was the first which Aura had heard of the stranger’s adoption in the Vale, and coming so soon after what her husband had said, she was naturally astonished, for Mr. Patrick Grainger was

not given to impulsive friendships; and yet—Jasper could not have introduced this man, nor even sanctioned him! Things looked a little puzzling to her; but it was no business of hers she thought to try and disentangle the web, so she simply declined the invitation for both Jasper and herself, saying that she “knew he would not break through his rule for this or any other occasion, and that of course she could not go without him. The children were quite well, and sent grandpapa and grandmamma a great many kisses. They had been to the Lea Woods to-day looking for ferns; Tiny and baby in the panniers; and Julia had found the holly fern, which perhaps mamma remembered her (Aura’s) anxiety about one summer.” With other pleasant little gossip, such as mammas and grandmamas appreciate. But woman-like in a postscript at the end she said, “I cannot think, dear mamma, why you call that man my husband’s *friend*. We do not know him here.” Then she sealed and sent off the letter; and when Jasper came into the room, told him what she had done.

“ Quite right,” he said ; “ I certainly would not have gone, and I am very much annoyed that your father and mother have asked that fellow to the Rectory at all. How did they pick him up, I wonder ? ”

“ Through Mr. Grainger,” said Aura, looking at him half surprised. “ He took him it seems to Mrs. Price’s, where very likely Hannah met him too.”

“ Oh yes, I forgot,” he said, and turned away his head.

“ Shall I tell mamma what you say ? ” asked Aura ; “ they ought to know that he is not a fit person to invite ; and if he is getting into society here, and is even growing so intimate as to be suffered to walk with the young ladies of the place, ought they not all to know his real character ? And especially mamma ? ” she added, thinking of the inconsiderate nature of that dear old lady, and of her inability to judge rightly on almost any subject presented to her.

“ No ; do you keep out of it ; I will tell her myself,” replied Jasper slightly embarrassed.

“ Mr. Grainger is coming out in a new character, adopting strangers he knows nothing of ! ” laughed Aura.

“ That is often the way with your very clever and suspicious fellows,” said Jasper with an impatient sneer. “ They make mysteries and crimes out of everything of which they cannot see quite the beginning and the end, and would accuse an honest man of God knows what rascality, simply because they do not understand him; but a plausible villain like this they adopt whole—lies, varnish, and villainy—and credit him with every virtue under heaven because he has flattered their vanities. In any contest between this man and myself for instance, if such a thing were possible,” he added disdainfully, “ I should go down and he would go up; at least, if Mr. Patrick Grainger, and Mr. Bennet, and a few others of the same set, held the balance. My word would count for nothing against his, and yet they know me and he is a stranger.” He spoke with an almost passionate disdain, and as if the subject touched him nearly.

“ Who cares for the opinion of the world, as

a mere opinion ? ” said Aura. “ It is the truth, and not what others think that upholds us or destroys.”

“ But the truth has sometimes the effect of falsehood,” said Jasper ; “ and I doubt if the Clive Vale people could distinguish the one from the other.”

“ None of us ? ” and she looked up archly.

“ Oh, you are not a Valeite ! ” said Jasper, laying his hand on her head ; “ you came direct from heaven, and belong to humanity not to a country village. I never think of you as a native of Clive Vale ; there are certain people too great to be localized, and you are one of them.”

“ I wonder if I shall be great enough to resist all your flattery ! ” said Aura. But she did not feel it to be flattery : love, even when at its wildest, is never flattery !

CHAPTER XI.



“ WELL, my dear ? ” said the Rector, when the servant brought in Aura’s answer. “ Well ? ”

“ Oh, of course, just the same thing ! she will not come ; of course not ! That precious husband of hers will not go out, and she like an undutiful girl as she is will not oblige her parents by even this little concession ! ”

The Rector sighed.

“ We see very little of her now,” he said ; though indeed they saw her often, but not much of Jasper—less and less as time went on, and never to tea or dinner in either house. And people always think they do not see you at all if it is not exactly in the way they like, and whenever they wish.

"No," said Mrs. Escott, bitterly. "The saying is, 'Your son is your son till he gets him a wife, your daughter's your daughter all the days of her life,' but it is just the reverse in our case. Aura has thrown us off since she married as completely as if we were only common acquaintances, and not her father and mother at all; but Herbert would act very differently."

"It is a difficult part for a woman to play when her husband is such an ill-conditioned fellow as Trelawney," said the Rector apologetically. "You know, my dear, you are told by the Wisdom that cannot err to forsake all you have, father and mother too, and cleave to your husband whoever he may be; and Aura is very delicately circumstanced; very delicately indeed!"

"You always take her part papa, whatever she may do and however wrongly she may act," said Mrs. Escott testily; and then she went on reading her letter. "Been to Lea Woods, have they? and taken Tiny and baby? How Aura does drag those poor children about to be sure! She has no mercy on them! What business had baby to go

to Lea Woods, bumping in those great ugly panniers I should like to know, and he fighting with his teeth as he is ! If Aura were to lose that precious boy I should not wonder ; she is so rash and imprudent with them ; and as for being guided by me I might as well be the sign-post speaking, for anything she cares for what I say ! All very well for those great rude hoydens of French girls to go scampering off to your Lea Woods and places ; and perhaps Dotty might go as a treat ; but the little ones ought to be kept at home I say, and the nice sunny garden or the Lower Road is the best place for them, and not tearing about through the nasty damp woods like that ; I'll be bound they have got themselves full of thorns and prickles, pretty dears ! Why can't she send them here when she wants a change for them ? I suppose she wouldn't trust her own mother with them for half a day ! Why, papa, what's this ? 'I cannot think, dear mamma, why you call that man my husband's *friend* ; we do not know him here.' What does she mean ? Mr. Dysart *is* Mr. Trelawney's friend ; did not Mr.

Grainger tell us all so at Mrs. Price's? and did he not say too, that when he was down at the Blue Bell Mr. Trelawney's own man came and gave him a whole bundle of bank notes—two or three hundred pounds—and a very kind letter of thanks for the past loan? If borrowing a man's money and paying it back again is not being a man's friend, I don't know what is!"

"That is a strange thing for Aura to say," returned the Rector. "I hope we are going to have no more complications and mysteries! I am sure we have had enough of them for a lifetime."

"So say I papa," cried Mrs. Escott. "Since that man came" (she meant Jasper) "the place has not been like itself. I am sure I little thought of all that would happen when I went into the drawing-room that day and told Aura Croft was taken—the most unlucky day for me that I have ever seen, that is all I know." Saying which she took out her pocket-handkerchief and began to cry; under cover of which occupation the good old Rector retreated noiselessly. If

there was anything he dreaded more than his wife's fits of temper it was her fits of feeling. Besides, his absence checked her weeping, for she found it cold comfort to cry alone so got angry at his heartlessness instead.

Out of a natural curiosity to know what it all meant, Mrs. Escott took Mr. Grainger aside after dinner the next day, and saying to him, "Goodness, Mr. Grainger! I hope we are not going to get into another mess; but what do you think my daughter says now?" showed him Aura's indignant little postscript, opening her eyes while he read.

Just for an instant Mr. Grainger was staggered, his old habits of suspicion being too strong to be entirely overlaid even by Mr. Dysart's fascinations; but only for an instant; then he took the other reading.

"I think I know what it means," he said with a little laugh. "Mr. Dysart and Mr. Trelawney are certainly not friends, in the ordinary sense of the word. I mean they do not like each other, and it cannot be expected that they should; for

the one knows too much of the other for it to be possible there should be much cordiality between them."

"Goodness, Mr. Grainger!" again repeated Mrs. Escott, "I cannot think whatever you can mean!"

"I mean this, Mrs. Escott—that Mr. Dysart knows Mr. Trelawney's whole history, and I fancy he could make a very queer tale of it if he chose," said Mr. Grainger, emphasizing every word. "I think it only right that you should be told this, though some among us advised that you should be kept in the dark as long as you could. But you know, Mrs. Escott, straightforwardness and being above board have always been my way, and my way they will remain to the end of the chapter."

"What does he know?" asked Mrs. Escott flushing. "Dear me, Mr. Grainger! I hope nothing very bad?"

"Nothing very good, Mrs. Escott, I promise you. Remember, I have always said so—always, from the first. When you were all crazy about

the fellow and would not listen to me, I told you how it would be; but you would burn your fingers in spite of my warnings; so now you must cool them the best way you can."

"I am sure, Mr. Grainger, I wish that we had been guided by you," said poor fat Mrs. Escott in tribulation. "I cannot say that I had anything to do with it, one way or the other, for Aura you see was so soon fascinated by Mr. Trelawney, and I am sure I spoke to her often enough about it; and the Rector never will believe anything against any one if he can help it; so that I was completely set aside, as one may say, and made nothing of."

"You will all know better another time," returned Mr. Grainger; "but that is poor consolation for you and the Rector with your daughter, as things are," he added.

He did not wish that matters should come to a tragedy with Mr. Trelawney, for "Miss Aura's" sake—by no means so far as that—but he was not sorry that both she and the Escotts should have just singed their skin, that he might have

the pleasure of uncovering the sore every now and then, and holding it up to the light saying—

“There’s a pretty piece of business that I could have saved you from if you would have only attended to me.” Mr. Grainger was not singular in thus preferring his own character for astuteness to the well-being of his friends. Many kind-hearted persons would rather that the sorrow which they predicted should happen, than that they should be caught out in false prophecies and be known to have mistaken mists for marble.

“I heard your daughter’s name,” said Mr. Dysart, coming to the pair whom he had been watching furtively from the beginning of their conversation, and edging up gradually. He was great in the quiet way in which he could work himself up to a given point unseen and unsuspected. “May I venture to say, madame, without indiscretion, that I am disappointed in not seeing Mrs. Trelawney here to-day? I had quite calculated on meeting her with my old friend at their father’s house, and I assure you it is a disappointment.”

“ We asked her,” said Mrs. Escott, “ but she would not come. Mr. Trelawney never dines out anywhere ; at least not since he married—one would think he was afraid of being poisoned by the way in which he shrinks from eating anything in any one’s house ! He used to come here fast enough before, whether asked or not, but now that he has got what he wanted he does not care for *us*.”

“ That is unfortunately too often the way with men in love,” said Mr. Dysart pleasantly. “ To kiss the mother for the sake of the child, is an old sin among us ; but a reprehensible one all the same. But your daughter ? she has not changed, though he has ? ”

“ Indeed but she has ! we see next to nothing of her, and are nothing to her, since she married,” said Mrs. Escott irritably.

“ She is a devoted wife and mother, I hear.”

“ Devoted ? yes ! she is a perfect slave ! She has given herself up to her husband and those children of his, and thinks of nothing else. I don’t mind her loving her own, of course—that is only natural ; but I confess it does annoy me to see

her devotion to those little forward pusses, Julia and Mabel ; and it distresses poor papa, who so dotes upon her ! It is a cruel case, Mr. Dysart, and none but a mother knows what a mother's feelings are ! " sighing.

" And the young ladies of the first marriage then are bold and forward, and not amiable ? " asked Mr. Dysart with a peculiar expression in his face. " That is not the usual fault of French demoiselles."

" I do not say quite that, " said Mrs. Escott. " I don't like them ; but I dare say they might have been made something of, if my daughter had not spoilt them as she has ; she treats them in every respect precisely as if they were her own, and I do not think that right you know, Mr. Dysart ; at least it is a thing I cannot understand, and could never have done."

" I understand madame ; you mean that your natural affections would have been too strong for your colder duties ? " said Mr. Dysart with a sweet smile.

" Exactly ! " cried Mrs. Escott ; " that is just it."

“It is fortunate for the elder children though, that Mrs. Trelawney is so capable of justice as against instinct,” said Mr. Dysart.

“Yes ; it may be fortunate for them, but it does not make it any better for us nor for the other children,” cried Mrs. Escott. “They cannot like it when they grow up—I am sure Dotty won’t—and it is very trying to Mr. Escott and me, of course ; very trying indeed it is !”

“I am very sorry for you, my dear madame,” said Gregory soothingly, “and can enter into all you feel. It must be trying for you, very trying indeed as you say, and one sees no help for you. A wife’s love which has lasted six years will, it is to be supposed, last a lifetime ; and Jasper is not the man I should say to let a woman escape him when he has once got her.”

“You know my son-in-law very well ?” asked Mrs. Escott. She had asked the same question at the Hollies when first introduced to the stranger, but she did not know then that Mr. Dysart had stones to fling—a whole wallet full of them—and that he had flung some already, with a

pretty good aim, too!—and as she did not like to be perhaps the first to tell him that they were dissatisfied, and not a little suspicious of her son-in-law, the conversation had languished for want of something definite to keep it alive; for on his side too, Mr. Dysart did not choose to be the first to carry ill tales of her daughter's husband to any mother, he said. He waited until his cup of poison came round to her in the ordinary way of gossip; as he knew it would, and intended it should.

“Yes I do; perhaps I ought to say I did,” replied Mr. Dysart pleasantly. “A few years sometimes make a great difference in a man's character and career, and the Jasper Trelawney I lost sight of in Paris, and the man I find here after seven years of separation, are different in all things; so that I cannot say I know him, but that I knew him once.”

“But you have seen him since you came to the Vale, have you not?” asked Mrs. Escott. She was determined to get to the bottom of it all, if she could. “I suppose you have called on him, to tell him you were here?”

“ Oh, yes ! I called at his house one day, and saw him there. What a pretty place he has got—vraiment magnifique ! ”

“ Did you see my daughter or the children ? ” she asked again.

“ No, none of them. My friend was not over well pleased to see me, madame, that is the truth ; and he did not present me to his family. Old friends sometimes carry awkward reminiscences,” he added significantly.

“ And I am afraid, from all I can learn, that my son-in-law is as open as any one to that kind of thing,” said Mrs. Escott in a rather excited manner.

Mr. Dysart shook his head a little sorrowfully—

“ He has not been always trop rangé,” he said “ but—que voulez-vous, madame ?—bygones must be bygones with us all. He has entered himself now into the ranks of the respectable pères de famille, and the old times have passed ; so ought our memories with them.”

“ That is not very consoling though to us,” said Mrs. Escott peevishly. “ It is not very

pleasant to have one's only daughter married to a man that has led a profligate life when he was young, and that one knows really next to nothing of!"

"Where ignorance is bliss, Mrs. Escott, 'tis folly to be wise," said Mr. Patrick Granger sententiously.

"True, mon ami!" cried Mr. Dysart, with an approving nod. "If I might venture on a word of advice to madame," he continued, "it would be not to attempt to stir up my friend's past life. Let it lie in the oblivion into which he has wisely cast it; believe me, it is the best thing to do!"

"But I cannot live in such a manner!" cried Mrs. Escott; "one might as well be in Turkey, and not know what one's father or husband was like, as live like this, with nothing but mysteries and secrets in one's own family! For of course, it is one's own family, though Aura has cast us off so much! Who could bear it, Mr. Dysart? I ask you that!"

"Very painful I admit, my dear madame, but what is to be done? hein?"

"Well, Mr. Dysart, now that you have come

among us, and as you say you know so much about my son-in-law, I think you might tell us a little," said Mrs. Escott.

"Pardon, madame; I cannot tell my friend's secrets because I have chanced to come to a place where he is residing! I do not think that would be noble. This much only I will tell you—which indeed is no more than what you know for yourselves already—he *has* secrets, and very deep and grave ones; and I know them; and that is why he will not invite me into his house or meet me here or elsewhere in society, because he does not like to be reminded by my presence of times and circumstances which he would rather forget. But more than this you cannot get from me. Ask my friend Grainger here, if I have said more, or if I have betrayed my old comrade in one single particular."

"No, I must always say that Mr. Dysart has behaved most honourably to Mr. Trelawney," answered Mr. Grainger, "all things considered—the wrongs done and the slights now offered—I will add, most nobly. Even to me, to whom I

think he would tell almost anything, he has kept the secrets he alludes to, religiously."

"And shall to the death," said Mr. Dysart solemnly, lightly tapping his chest. "And the more so, my dear madame, because, as Mr. Grainger tells you, my friend Jasper has injured me and done me great wrong in past times. To revenge myself now on him would be pitiful, and not my manner of acting. And beside, to what end? What good would it do me to ruin his life?"—he was speaking now rapidly, and with much gesture and excitement. "My own position needs no victim; I am superior to him in all worldly advantages—in wealth, birth, connection, position, all—why should I then come into this quiet place and hunt a poor fellow to death, when he has thought to have found an asylum and oblivion for ever? Bon Dieu! I should hate myself for such meanness! No; let Jasper rest in peace for me: what I know I know, and it shall die and be buried with me!"

"Goodness, Mr. Dysart! you frighten me! What is it all about, I wonder? I hope it

isn't murder or forgery?" cried Mrs. Escott, who had turned quite pale. "I wish you would tell me, Mr. Dysart—indeed I do," she pleaded.

He shook his head.

"If you wish to know, you must find one whose ideas of honour are less strict than mine, my dear madame," he said loftily, and turned away to Miss Ellen Campbell sitting next to the little mouse-like Hannah; for Ellen and Kate and a few of the younger Valeites had come in the evening as "refreshers" to the diners; which was always the pleasant custom at the Rectory, when it gave its state dinner-parties to the elders.

Sitting down then, not between but facing those young ladies, Mr. Dysart, in the kindest and most condescending manner possible, took them both off to Paradise, discoursing on all the wonderful things he had seen—the art treasures of Munich and the Louvre, and the exquisite scenery of Zurich and Lake Como, with florid descriptions of the vineyards and the butterflies, the groves of myrtles, and the lake-side woods as

full of the “little butting cyclamen,” as Landor calls it, as ours are full of wind flowers; Harry Grant, poor fellow, standing a little way off, writhing in the first folds of the great Anaconda destined as time went on to almost strangle him; and Hannah Marks, who had not forgotten yesterday and who felt as if she of all the room most belonged to Mr. Dysart, for had they not a secret between them? looking up at him with an expression of reverence which it would have taken many lengthy poems to thoroughly translate. She had been rather astonished, by the by, that Mr. Dysart met her so very unconcernedly, in no way whatever showing that a lonely walk, decided pressures of the hand, familiar words, and pretty speeches had passed between them; while she felt — did she know what she felt, or could she give that end a name of which this was the first small fatal beginning?

Mr. Dysart did not know that he had touched the secret chord of Hannah’s inner life by his idle gallantries, making himself the Jupiter to her Semele, the King Cophetua where she was only

the beggar's daughter undistinguished ; and that now these foreign romances of his were perfecting the charm. He was the first travelled man who had ever spoken to her of foreign parts ; for Jasper Trelawney of course had never held more conversation with her than if she had been a painted doll, as Mrs. Escott would have said ; and the familiarity with which he spoke of Italy and all the other places which she was so yearning to see, (for he dashed off sketches from fancy quite as easily as from memory, and spoke as glibly of Greece and Egypt where he had not been, as of Paris and Vienna where he had,) almost took away her breath, while filling her soul with such admiration as she had not known since her father showed her the Coronation in a peep-show, when she was young enough to believe in peep-shows and miracles. *

He took care however not to talk too long to the young ladies ; to whom moreover he spoke with something of the patronizing manner of a father or elder brother ; and he took care to speak impartially to all alike, singling out no one in

particular : least of all Hannah Marks, by whose favour no good could possibly come to him. But he attended chiefly to the married ladies—Mrs. Escott and Mrs. Price—and to the gentlemen, and made himself the life and soul of the evening with his pleasant conversation and the delightful fund of anecdote he possessed. It was next thing to being at the Tuilleries itself to hear the stories he told of the Emperor and Empress ; while as for the Prince Imperial, he knew as much of that young gentleman's sayings and doings as any mother of her firstborn's ! The Vale could never sufficiently congratulate itself on its latest acquisition : the very best it had ever made, it said to itself complacently.

Mr. and Mrs. Escott had a long discussion that night on the hints of the new-comer ; but while she was all for sifting them to the bottom, and forcing Mr. Jasper Trelawney to declare himself from his earliest infancy until now, he was for peace (his old desire), and letting things simmer as long as they would by nature, without putting sticks into the fire to make them boil over.

“What is the use of it, my dear?” he remonstrated; “the least said the soonest mended, and you know that Jasper is not a very pleasant gentleman to deal with. For myself, I confess I would rather put my hand into a hornet’s nest than stir up any question that would bring me into collision with him.”

“I don’t care, papa! I will tell Aura and him too what is said of them both. They ought to know, and Jasper ought to be made to explain himself. If he is hiding anything he is ashamed of, let him tell us what it is and have done with it; and if there is nothing to be ashamed of, let us know what all this mystery and foolishness means. But he daren’t tell the truth—that’s my belief. He has something that he is ashamed of, and that he is hiding, you may be sure of it. There are plenty of reasons why he likes to keep out of Mr. Dysart’s way I know, but I will force him to say what it all is, I am determined of it!”

“Very well, my dear,” returned the Rector quietly; “of course you will do as you like, but I can only tell you this: you will *not* like to see

yourself dragged into a case for libel ; for Jasper is just the man to carry things with a high hand, and prosecute right and left."

" Let him ! " cried Mrs. Escott ; " let him prosecute me if he likes, and I dare say Aura would never say ' don't ' to him, or lift her hand for me though I am her own mother. But if he does prosecute me I shall not mind, for I shall have done my duty, and that will be a satisfaction even if I go to the stake for it."

" You will not quite do that, my dear ; but you will get yourself into tremendous hot water, I am afraid," said the Rector. " Oh dear ! if people would but let things alone, how much better it would be ! At all events, my dear, you have the night to think it over in—wiser counsels may prevail in the morning."

" No, they shan't, papa," said his wife ; " my mind is made up, and I will go to-morrow to Croft and tell Jasper what is said of him if I die for it ; he cannot kill me, and I shall have done my duty."

“ You will get very hot, and perhaps have a fit of hysterics,” said the Rector.

“ I don’t care if I do,” said his wife ; “ Jasper shall know all, if I die for it ! ”

“ He will only talk you down, mother ; you can do nothing against him ! ”

“ Talk me down indeed ! ” I should like to see the man that could do *that* ! ” cried Mrs. Escott.

“ Well, my dear, I confess not many could,” said the Rector smothering a smile ; “ but if the man lives who could do so, it is Mr. Jasper Trelawney.”

“ Let him try ! ” cried Mrs. Escott.

And the Rector said no more. She had come to that point when remonstrance simply strengthens a resolution, and makes bad worse by many degrees ; and her husband understood her stages.

CHAPTER XII.



THE next day—it was a lowering, thundery day, hot and stifling—Mrs. Escott set off in the little pony-chaise to Croft, after vainly trying to persuade her husband to accompany her. But the old man knew better. If he could not control the strong-headedness of his loving spouse, at all events he could forsake her when abroad on any of her wilder flights; which he always took very good care to do. So she went alone, fuming at the Rector for his cowardice, and not quite so valiant now that the moment approached, as she was when twelve good hours stood broadside between herself and her terrible son-in-law.

Aura and Jasper were both in the drawing-room when she entered; Aura amusing herself by

sketching her husband as he sat reading the paper, lounging away half-an-hour after luncheon before going back to the copse to see how his men were getting on with that new garden of his. He was making a set of asparagus beds and a melon plantation, and they were to be the wonder of the country, as all the Trelawneys' things were. It annoyed the good lady though, to find them together; she would have preferred to have encountered her daughter alone, when she could have bombarded her at her pleasure; but she was a little more afraid of attacking Jasper, and yet in such ill-humour with him that she could not possibly forego the fight. No one else was with them, for the children were in the garden, some of them restless and peevish with the sultriness of the day—always trying to young children; and it did not raise Mrs. Escott's spirits or soothe her temper, to hear their little fractious voices and sudden bursts of crying; for like all people not living with children day by day, she thought every wail meant pain or danger, and was greatly annoyed

with Aura for not rushing out to see what was the matter.

“ Well, dear mamma!” said Aura, rising and kissing her as she came into the room; “ and how are you after your fatigues of yesterday? ”

“ Quite well, thank you, Aura,” said Mrs. Escott stiffly. “ How do you do, Mr. Trelawney? ”

Mr. Trelawney held out his hand silently.

“ How is the rector? ” he then said in his cool, lordly way.

“ I said that we were both quite well, thank you,” Mrs. Escott answered snappishly. “ But I was sadly put out, Aura, by your not coming! ” she added turning to her daughter; “ I don’t know indeed when I was so hurt.”

“ I was so sorry that you had set your heart upon it,” Aura said; “ you know what an unsociable old thing he is ” (playfully), “ and how he will not be dressed and taken out anywhere, as a *douce* Christian man should; so it is almost a pity you do not leave him alone, and take no farther notice of him at all.”

“ You ought to have learnt by heart the full

sum of my disagreeables by now, Mrs. Escott," said Jasper pleasantly; "and you know that I do not like society, and that I am selfish and always refuse to do what I do not like to do."

"But it was not you I wanted," said Mrs. Escott; "it was Aura. I know that since you took away our daughter the Rectory has no attractions for you; else of course both papa and I are always very happy to see you, and only wish you would come oftener; but it was Aura that I specially wanted yesterday, for she is our daughter and you are not, and we feel a slight more from her; it may be expected from you!" with a sudden flush.

"Oh! no slight; you are not to think that," said Aura.

"It looks very like it," said her mother. "Bless me! there's that dear child crying again," she exclaimed in a fever; for the baby just then gave a roar as if he was being barbarously murdered, to say the least of it, but which Aura's practised ear told her meant nothing. "How you can sit here so quietly and listen to him as if he was only a woolly lamb squeaking,

I cannot conceive, Aura ! If it had been Julia or Mabel you would have run fast enough ! ”

“ He is very fractious to-day,” Aura answered mildly. “ Poor little fellow ! his teeth are troubling him and the heat is trying them all.”

“ Yes, and you did no good cantering off to Lea Woods the day before yesterday ! ” flashed out Mrs. Escott, who had been determined “ to give it her for that ” on the very first opportunity. “ You had better have come to me instead.”

“ I do not think it hurt them,” Aura answered.

“ Oh ! you never think anything *you* do wrong,” said Mrs. Escott ; “ not even when you half kill your children with dragging them about to Lea Woods and places, and insult your papa and me by your slights.”

“ If you must scold some one, Mrs. Escott, have the kindness to scold me, not my wife ! ” said Jasper haughtily. “ But indeed I do not see why you should scold any one.”

“ I suppose I may speak to my own daughter as I choose,” said Mrs. Escott angrily.

“ Not before me, madam,” retorted Jasper.

“ You are simply out of temper with us both because we did not dine at the Rectory yesterday, and I must say I think you are rather foolish to let a peculiarity, which you already know of, annoy you. Why do you take it as a personal affront because I dislike society and am selfish enough to indulge my disinclination? If you disliked peaches, I should not think you slighted me if you refused to eat a basketful that I might have sent you. We must be allowed to exercise some amount of free will in our intercourse with each other; and courtesy under any other terms would be simply slavery.”

“ Oh, I cannot follow all that fine reasoning, Mr. Trelawney,” said Mrs. Escott irritably; “ my poor head is not strong enough. I only know that I had a particular reason for wishing Aura—and yourself if you had liked, but Aura especially—to come to our house yesterday, and I think you might have obliged me.”

“ Perhaps your particular reason for wishing for us was partly ours for staying away,” said Mr. Trelawney, and looked her full in the face.

Mrs. Escott felt that they were shortening their swords, and that the moment for the home thrust was coming.

“To meet Mr. Dysart,” she said with a plunge.

“To meet that man,” he answered coldly.

“But you ought to tell us why, Mr. Trelawney; and that is what I have come about to-day. I must know why you will not meet him! He has been introduced in the Vale as your friend, and now you call him a man, and say you will not meet him!”

“I did not introduce him as my friend, Mrs. Escott,” said Jasper.

“Yes, but Mr. Grainger did; and whether you introduced him or not, he *is* your friend, Mr. Trelawney—or was; though from all he says, we can quite well understand why he should not be so now,” she said with meaning. “Some people may know too much of other people’s past lives, Mr. Trelawney, to make it pleasant to meet. That is what I know; and what is more, I know that Mr. Dysart is quite a gentleman, and above board

and fair in all *he* says, and that one sees no cause to suspect *him* of deceit or mystery either—” speaking in very marked italics, and in a very shrill voice.

“Mamma!” said Aura, “you should not say such things! You forget yourself, and to whom you are speaking. What can you know of this mere stranger to make you trust his vile insinuations against such a man as this?” She put her hand into her husband’s, and stood with her head a little bent but her body erect, looking as she often did, like the Clytie warmed into passion and life.

“I know a great deal more than you think, miss,” said her mother; “and I do not in the least degree forget myself, or who I am talking to. Mr. Trelawney there knows fast enough what Mr. Dysart can say!”

“Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me, Mrs. Escott, what he *does* say,” said Jasper. “Whatever it is it will not astonish me for extravagance—neither to be uttered by such a man as that, nor to be believed in by such people as yourselves.

I mean the Vale people generally, not you individually," he added with a kind of apology in his voice as haughty as the offence; "but indeed, Mrs. Escott, you are just as credulous as any one else, and as prone to believe evil of your neighbours. You could be made to credit any monstrosity under heaven of almost any one you know, sooner than you could be induced to trust in silence and reserve."

"I am not to be brow-beaten off my point, Mr. Trelawney," said Mrs. Escott—the swords were getting very short indeed now—"and as for trust, you have had a great deal more given you than you deserve; and so I tell you. You have married my daughter on trust, and broken our hearts, you have; and we don't know who you are, or what you are, or where you come from, or anything about you at all; and if that is not trust, I wonder what is! Trust indeed! it would have been better for all of us if you had not had quite so much of it."

"Mamma! mamma!" cried Aura; "I must leave the room, indeed I must, if you speak

to my husband so. How can you think I could bear it!"

"Now then, Aura, you *shall* know what Mr. Dysart says of your husband," almost screamed Mrs. Escott, who had lost her temper.

Aura laid her hand on her mother's arm with a light but firm pressure.

"Mamma, I will not," she said, her voice at its deepest.

"Let her speak, my Aura," said Jasper quietly ; "it will relieve her. Can you shrink from hearing the loose words of a scoundrel? What can he say to hurt me, wife?"

"Could you hear me traduced, Jasper?" said Aura.

"It is not traducing, Aura!" cried her mother. "Mr. Dysart has behaved most honourably, and will not say a word that could get Mr. Trelawney into real trouble. He even told—and much to his credit—how your husband paid him off that old gambling debt, I think it was—yes, a gambling debt, or forgery, or something, Mr. Grainger told me—and that was to show that he was an honour-

able man now, at all events, whatever else he had been. But all he says is, that Mr. Trelawney has led a very bad life—very bad indeed—and that he knows a great deal about him—some dreadful secret that would ruin him if it were told ; and so he will not tell us what it is ; but it is as bad as murder, or bigamy, or something dreadful like that ; and that is a pretty thing to have said of your husband, Aura ! I wonder how you can bear it ! I am sure I could not and would not.”

“ Perhaps I would not, dear mamma, if I believed it,” said Aura ; “ but you see I do not ; I do not believe one single word you have been saying.”

“ What an insolent girl you are ! ” said Mrs. Escott bitterly. “ Had you not better call me a story-teller at once ? Tell me to my face indeed, that you do not believe a word I have been saying ! Aura, some judgment will come upon you for your wickedness to me ; as sure as you are standing there it will ! ”

“ I did not mean that I did not believe *you*, or that you were telling untruths, dear mamma,” said

Aura ; “only I do not believe what you have been told ; I do not believe this man—this Mr. Dysart.”

“ You don’t know what you believe,” said her mother ; “ and your want of proper religious faith will ruin you some day, Aura, body and soul ! ”

“ Is your business with my wife, or with me, Mrs. Escott ? ” asked Jasper. “ Again I must remind you that I cannot suffer you to speak to her in this manner before me ; and as yet I have understood nothing of all that you would charge me with. You say that this man accuses me of leading a bad life when I was young. Perhaps you can pin him to facts, and then you will know a few more particulars about myself than I have thought fit to tell you. When he gives you this dreadful secret, Mrs. Escott, come up here with it, and let us have a look at it.” He spoke with extreme calmness of manner ; but Aura, who knew his face, could read the signs of something more tempestuous than placid beneath that quiet surface. The mother however thought him as cool and unembarrassed—as he wished her to think him.

“ Well, Mr. Trelawney,” she said a little sobered, and now that her budget was let loose and she *was* pinned to facts, rather shocked to see what a beggarly account it was, and how powerless to move either son or daughter ; “ it may be all nothing of course, and Mr. Dysart may owe you a grudge about something, and so be revenging himself by insinuating things against you, as papa says ; but it is not very pleasant to hear that one’s son-in-law has been a profligate and a reprobate, and all sorts of bad things. And you know, Aura, we do know next to nothing of your husband, and whether you know more or not, who can tell ? Besides, what satisfaction have we in that ? It is nothing to us what *you* know ; what we want is to know for ourselves ! ”

“ And if by that you mean that I am to go into every petty detail respecting my past life, and give my private affairs as general property to the scandal-mongers of Clive Vale, I fear you will go without the satisfaction you covet for many years to come,” said Jasper quietly. “ You know all of me, Mrs. Escott, that you are likely to know,

and when you learn more perhaps you will be good enough to tell me."

"There is something in it I don't like at all!" cried Mrs. Escott. "I have only a poor head and can easily be confused and put off, but I know there is something here that should not be; and if I was Aura I would not stand it, that I would not!"

Jasper looked at his wife. "I fancy she is well enough content with things as they are," he said; "and unless you wish to destroy her contentment, I do not see the good of all you have been saying, Mrs. Escott. However, I am no more afraid of her than she is of me. We have learnt to trust each other no matter what the appearance or the trial. Is it not so, Aura?"

"Yes," said Aura pressing the hand she still held.

"I hope you will not be deceived," said Mrs. Escott; "but I am sure it all breaks my heart, that it does; and I have never known a happy day since Mr. Trelawney came into the Vale. Poor papa and I had both better be dead and buried,

and then we shall be out of the way and done with, and not trouble any one again ! ”

And then the flood-gates opened, and with a prefatory sob Mrs. Escott began to cry.

“ Comfort your mother, dear love,” said Jasper hurriedly, and went out into the garden to the children. He felt that if he remained he would probably take his respected mother-in-law by the shoulders, and quietly turn her out of the house. Besides, all men are cowards in the face of certain personal annoyances, of which a woman’s tears count for one ; and the most loving husband, and the most unselfish, will shuffle off this burden if he can, and lay it on his wife’s shoulders instead of his own.

When he left the room, Mrs. Escott still crying, but lifting up her flushed broad face from her handkerchief, said solemnly—“ Aura, as sure as you have a head upon your shoulders, that husband of yours will turn out no better than he should be. Don’t tell me ! a man who has nothing to be ashamed of would not come here like a thief or a runaway, and live for

seven years like a rat in a hole, and never so much as show his whiskers outside his own door. And why should things be said of him if he was all right ? This Mr. Dysart is a gentleman, Aura—a real gentleman—and of course he would not say what was not true. I only wish you saw him for yourself ! He knows the Emperor and Empress quite well, and the little Prince Imperial too. I have been thinking what a nice thing it would be for Dotty when he is a little older, to send him over there—to Paris I mean—to Mr. Dysart ; it might make the dear child's fortune ! ”

“ I am not an ambitious mother,” said Aura smiling.

“ Nonsense ! it is a mother's duty to do the best she can by her children. You ought to make Mr. Dysart's acquaintance, I tell you ; such a chance may never occur again.”

“ I do not think it would quite answer, mamma,” Aura replied quietly ; “ and I am sure that Jasper would not consent to my knowing a man he thinks so ill of as this Mr. Dysart ; still less let him have one of his children to introduce.”

“ Jasper ! Jasper ! there’s always that Jasper in the way of everything ! You do not seem to me as if you dare call your soul your own ! I hate such slavishness, and to such a man in the mist too, as this precious Jasper is ! I hate all your dark lanterns and Guy Fawkeses ; and this Mr. Jasper Trelawney is a deal too mysterious for my taste, and I should just like to see him forced to explain himself, that I would ! ”

“ Well, dear mamma,” said Aura, “ you shall talk if it relieves you ; but of course what you are saying of my husband can make no impression on me.”

“ Then you are an undutiful monkey,” said Mrs. Escott angrily, “ and I have a great mind to say that neither I nor your papa will ever set foot in your house again. You might as well tell me that I am in my second childhood, and not worth listening to.”

“ You seem to forget, dear mamma, that Jasper is my Husband,” said Aura.

“ Husband or no husband, Aura, you have no business to forget your duty to your mother,” said Mrs. Escott. “ I only hope your disobedience

will not come back to you through your own ; but it will I am afraid, if the ten commandments speak true ! There's that precious baby squalling again. Do, for mercy's sake, child, go and see what is the matter ! I daresay Mabel and Julia are sticking pins into him ! Ah ! well, when you were little—you and your brother—I did not leave you to servants as you leave your children ! But then I was not a fine lady as you are, and thought my house and children of more importance than all this rubbish ! ” She meant the music and drawing.

“ Wait an instant, and I will bring the little ones to you,” said Aura good-temperedly.

Which she did : Jasper hiding away in the copse till his mother-in-law should have gone. And after Mrs. Escott had found fault with everything about them—food, clothing, times, habits—and had shown how much better her own maternal management had been, she gradually calmed down into her usual state of more placid fussiness ; though she blazed out afresh when Aura refused to let Tiny and baby eat the bull's-eyes and Everton toffee she had brought for them in her crimson velvet bag.

" Such nonsense ! " she said ; " she always gave her babies sweeties, and they never did them any harm, and why should these little dears be deprived of them ? She hated such new-fangled notions ; as if the world had all gone wrong till now, and had been waiting for Miss Aura Escott to put it to rights. She had better go home then, where she was not looked on quite as an idiot ; though papa was trying at times ; but at all events she had been thought capable of managing children when she had them, and had not been told that what she wanted to give them would poison them. As if she would hurt a hair of their precious heads,— and as if she didn't know what was good for them ! "

On which she went away ; in dudgeon of course ; and then Jasper emerged from his hiding-place and played with the babies till their tea-time. But for all his play he was unhappy ; as indeed he always was now—his gloom and sadness deepening daily, but with it his passionate love for Aura and the children ; which is the sign of distinction between sadness and temper, so far as I am able to read humanity.

CHAPTER XIII.



MONEY will not last for ever, even in a country village ; certainly not with Mr. Gregory Dysart, who was not one to spare a shilling while he had a sovereign in his pocket. So that, what between jaunts and junketings, visits to Corston in carriages and pairs, with picnic treats of Fortnum and Mason's hampers to the ladies and gentlemen composing the party, and the habits and manners generally of one accustomed to his thousands, Jasper's hundred soon melted away in the swindler's hot hand ; and now he found himself with but five pounds odd shillings left, and Mrs. Makemson's weekly bill due to-morrow. It was part of his programme here to be as scrupulously punctual in the times of his payments as he was princely in his scale, and never

to let a bill stand for twelve hours unpaid, generally adding some douceur, either as a compensation for loss of time, or as a gift to the children, or a new dress for the wife, or "You have not charged enough, my good people. It is unfair to yourselves." By which means Mr. Gregory Dysart had made himself as many friends in Clive Vale as there were tradespeople with whom he had dealings. There was not one of them all who would not have "put their hands into the fire for him," he used to say laughing; knowing by heart that truth of social life, that any man can buy a reputation. Give Robert Macaire money, and make Cato in debt to his shoemaker, and then poll the suffrages as to which is the better gentleman of the two; I think that Robert will have his fine fat thousands hoisting him by the breath of popular applause to the very top of the tree, while poor Cato will be down among the decimals, and considered but a "shabby party" after all. And Gregory at Clive Vale had purchased his suffrages as neatly as if they had been so many pink-silk favours sold over the counter.

What he had got that he meant to hold ; and the gripe he had on Jasper's life he had not the slightest intention of relaxing, cost what it might. Besides, he knew now the full extent of the power he had over him, and how it did not stop simply at the change of name and his knowledge of his life previous to this immurement at Clive Vale ; and was he going to be fool enough to let such an income as he could make out of that power slip from him as long as he could keep it ? Gregory had not graduated in the school of escroquerie to lose the highest honours for womanish weakness at the moment of success ; and he was not going to deny himself one desire, or to curtail his pleasures by the mere turn of a hair, that Jasper Trelawney might be saved either embarrassment or anguish ; stopping short only at absolute ruin ; and that simply for his own sake, not his victim's.

“ Now for my second grand coup,” he said to himself, on his return from a grand kind of picnic he had given to the Valeites. “ I am at the end of my funds, by Jove ! Sharp work for Jasper rather ; two months only—scarcely two months ;

but it can't be helped. I did think that a hundred would have lasted me about six months in this hole; but I cannot control my princeliness, as Mr. Makemson calls it, and so I have to trouble my banker again earlier than I expected. More hush money, if you please, Mr. Carthew; another twist of the screw, and the next card to be played out will win the game. I suppose that little fool Louise will be able to manage her part respectably. Gad! it is the best the little jade ever had. I almost wish that I was a woman for the sake of having such a chance. If she does as she is told, and plays her cards well, I should not wonder if we were to get a settlement of six or eight hundred a year; and that would make it worth one's while to leave the poor devil in peace for the rest of his life. But nothing short of that will do, and the more temporary arrangements I can make the better. And yet he may turn restive; and by grasping at too much we may lose all. Lord! what a thing life is," mused Mr. Gregory Dysart, "and how we are all governed by make-believes! Jasper is a make-believe; I am a make-believe; Louise

is a make-believe ; so was poor Lavinia ; so was the governor ; so was the mother when she passed herself off as a Seymour, and she and my father took each other in ; so are we all ; only some are more entirely so than others—and we quarrel about the degrees. However here goes. I wonder how that poor deluded fool up there will relish *this* pill ! ”

He drew his chair to the table ; took paper, pens, and ink ; blotted a great many sheets of note-paper before he finally settled to one ; and then got fairly into the swing of his second letter to Mr. Trelawney. He began by very formally, and with much French politeness, assuring him of the pain he was suffering in being obliged thus to trouble him again, and so soon ; but the fact was, others beside himself had to be considered, and it rested with Mr. Trelawney whether he would buy them off through himself, Mr. Gregory Dysart, or whether he would have them down at the Vale, and make his own terms with them in person. His friend Mr. Trelawney could perhaps guess to whom he was referring ; an individual about whose ultimate destination he had not been quite suffi-

ciently careful to inform himself some six or seven years ago, and by which carelessness he had put himself into the power of Mr. Gregory Dysart, made himself amenable to certain heavy penalties of the law, and placed others, presumably dear to him, in a false and what might eventually become a fatal position. Still he, Mr. Gregory Dysart, was just and kind-hearted; and if his fair and moderate demands were attended to, would keep all dark as before. But money must be paid within twenty-four hours from this date, else he should be compelled to waste half an hour in putting the case into Mr. Mountain's hands, who might be able to effect a better settlement for himself, and that other (underlined), than he proposed. In fact, it was simply a question as to the market value of a certain secret; and that they both understood. Which then did Mr. Trelawney value most, his money or his present home? his money or his reputation? his money or his family as now existing? Perhaps Mr. Trelawney would walk down to Mr. Dysart's this evening, when, in a personal interview, they could discuss certain matters dan-

gerous to trust to paper; dangerous that is for Mr. Trelawney, who would scarcely like to have them brought before the notice of the lady now his wife. Mr. Dysart had some important news to communicate, which he refused to communicate save orally; and if Mr. Trelawney did not think well to come to him, then he must go to Croft and force an interview with him on his own grounds. In conclusion, he begged Mr. Trelawney to be assured of his entire loyalty and devotion, and his willingness to help him in the painful circumstances that had arisen."

The letter was written in the third person throughout, sealed with a large coat of arms, and endorsed, "Gregory Dysart" on the cover. It was taken up to Croft by the potboy of the "Blue Bell," and the circumstance was made the most of everywhere; Gregory saying in rather a louder voice than necessary, to Mr. Grainger standing with him—"It is only a note to my friend Jasper, telling him to come down to me to-night. I have to regulate a small matter of business, which he has overlooked a little too long, I think; and

though I am a good-natured fellow, yet my friend Jasper had better mind what he is about, and not irritate me too much under all the circumstances!"

He spoke as he had written—with an accent of power; and the echo rang through the Clive Vale world, which from this day was more than ever convinced that Mr. Gregory Dysart held Jasper Trelawney in the hollow of his hand, and that he had only to give a slight pressure for the whole wind-bag of his respectability and good name to collapse, and be undone for ever. The very effect which the clever "gentleman from Paris" desired to produce was produced, and with one blow he raised his own credit, damaged Jasper's name, gratified his angry envy, and insulted the proud man who scorned and despised but did not dare to unmask him or to retaliate. And the man who had done all this by a few written words, had the right to call himself clever, and plume himself on his ability.

Yes, it was a commercial matter between the two men; silence and money to buy it; a mere marketable commodity, value so much; and the

only question involved—the extent of the demand from the one, and the power to meet it with the other. This was all, looked at on the surface; but below the surface, the moral conflict at issue?—the terrible struggle between villany and suffering, craft and a mistake, where the balance of appearances would lie against the sufferer, and where the villain would have the fairer share? These are the things which take the soul out of a man, and dry up his very life. A fair open fight braces his muscles, and nerves his manhood; but these secret conflicts when the truth would ruin him though innocent of moral guilt, and when, if he would save himself from undeserved destruction, he is driven into sin, prove his spiritual power and try his armour sorely. Those awful moments of one's life, when to do right is to be wrongly judged; when God is against us and the devil is our friend; when we must ourselves sacrifice our Isaacs if we would obey the higher law, or sign ourselves to Baal if we would keep our children's name unstained and our roof-tree standing firm—oh! those awful moments of secret temptation to do

the evil thing which no one knows of, in order to escape the shame that all men can see !

In such terrible moments as these, walking through fire to faith, strong men have died, and good men have failed, and the proud have bent themselves to meanness, and the loving have made themselves cruel. As how should it not be in times so out of gear that good brings forth evil, and evil seems to be the only bulwark of good, and the truth would have the bearing of a lie, and a lie be the sole preservative of truth ?

Such a moment had come now to Jasper, and he must bear himself through it with what grace and faith he had ; either to do well and painfully, sacrificing his dearest, or to save his beloved at the cost of his soul. This was as it looked to him ; another might have said, whether he would still go on suffering the nettle to be drawn lightly over him, stinging him to madness, or whether he would grasp it in his naked hand boldly, and dare the issue. Had he not been rendered weak by his love, and blind by his pride, this was what he would have done ; but when he thought of Aura

and all that would fall on her and on his children with that other terrible Possibility behind, he shrank from the trial with a fainting heart, and chose the shame which seemed the safer and the kinder way, instead. It had come then, at last ! The Fear, which certain of the man's ambiguous words had roused that day in the shrubbery drive, was true, and the dream of his Rest was over !

“I shall be back again soon, Aura, love,” he said, coming with his hat in his hand into the drawing-room, where she and the elder two children were sitting together on the ottoman.

The little ones were in bed. It was about eight o'clock now, and the late summer evenings were shortening rapidly, so that at eight it was dusk, and in half an hour more would be dark.

“Very well,” she said a little startled, for this was the first time that he had gone out thus in the evening, and so evidently on some concealed business. And even unsuspecting people when they fall into habits start at being shaken out of them. He was so deadly pale too, and with such an expression of wrath and anguish on his face—there

was the old hunted look in his eyes—the old wild watching, anxious search, as if he had caught the shadow of the pursuing Fate, and was waiting to meet her hand to hand—which, if even the restlessness and moodiness of these later times had taught her nothing, would have revealed all but the name of the sorrow.

She rose from her seat and went out with him into the hall.

“ You are not well, Jasper,” she then said ; “ and you are not happy. Something is troubling you, and you have not told me. You know I do not ask from curiosity, but if I can lighten your sufferings by sharing them, why not make me your wife by the sanctity of sorrow as well as by that of love ? ”

“ Why should I grieve you with my troubles ? ” answered Jasper taking her hand ; “ troubles that began and, as I hoped, had ended before I even knew your dear name, why should you be weighted with them ? For our joint life together—we share that in all its aspects, and have a mutual right to both its joy and sorrow ; but the thorns of

the past ought to have no place in the path of the present, and I must suffer for my own follies alone."

" You do not suffer alone, dearest Jasper," said Aura ; " I am with you in your trouble, only ignorantly, and perhaps more troubled than I need be, and fancying that things are worse than they are because of my ignorance."

" I scarcely think that," he said mournfully ; and Aura shivered at the dread and danger which seemed to lie in his voice.

" I know that you always act considerately for others, and that you act wisely," she said ; " and whatever is your will, my Jasper, in all connected with our two selves, is mine also. If you do not wish me to know, I will not ask again ; but of one thing you are sure, are you not ? that you could not come to the end of my love for you, and that you could not easily exhaust my courage or endurance ? "

There was something of the man's calm strength, if soft and tender as a woman should be, in the steadfast eyes that looked so earnestly

into his, and in the manner in which she laid her hand upon his shoulder. Had she pressed him again, he would have turned back and told her all ; but she only kissed him silently, and he passed through the hall-door with his secret still his own. She watched him as he strode down the long gravel walk with his eyes fixed upon the darkening sky, and when the turn in the drive shut him out from her view, it seemed to her, for just the nervous terror of the moment, as if she had lost him for ever.

Jasper strode on down the shrubbery drive through the lodge gates and along the High Cross Road leading into the village by the upper end, and so, still with the wrath and anguish on his face, to the house where his enemy and his fate sat waiting for him. Mrs. Makemson opened the door ; and, as she expressed it, was nearly knocked backwards at the sight of the haughty Master of Croft standing there like a ghost in the darkening twilight. Equally astonished, too, were aunt Dess and Hannah Marks, just shutting the windows preparatory to the lighted candles and closed curtains of the evening.

“Is your lodger at home?” asked Jasper, when Mrs. Makemson appeared. She curtseyed. “Yes, sir,” she said, and led him to the room where Gregory sat with half-a-dozen candles, making quite a grand illumination in that small apartment. “Here is Mr. Trelawney for you, Mr. Dysart,” she then said, as if half frightened at the occurrence; for it seemed to her as if something terrible must happen. “Mr. Trelawney was so white, and looked so like death,” as she told her gossips in the back parlour, when they all wondered whatever could have brought Mr. Trelawney out like this at night, and he who never went anywhere!

“We must come to some plainer understanding than what we have got now,” said Jasper without a word of more formal greeting, as soon as the door was shut and they were alone.

“I quite agree with you, mon ami,” returned Gregory coolly. “It will be better to formalize our little affair with scrupulous exactness, and then we shall know where we stand; which is more than we do at present.”

" You have my secret," began Jasper, " and I—"

" Have money to pay for its being safely warehoused," interrupted the other. " Just what I said in my letter, if you remember; a mere matter of exchange and barter, where we both want to drive a hard bargain."

" What do you want for your silence ? " asked Jasper.

" The utmost I can get, mon vieux."

" So I suppose; but there are limits to even a scoundrel's calculations. Do you expect all I have ? "

" No, not quite," answered Gregory quietly; " but I want enough to enable me to live like a gentleman, without working the old mill again. I am not bad, Jasper—you know that—and how I have been in a manner forced into my present way of life; but if Fortune, the jade ! would only give me a turn at respectability, you should soon see how I would pick myself up out of the mud, and live cleanly all my life after."

" I care nothing for your manner of life nor for your respectability," said Jasper haughtily;

“ I care only to be freed from the presence of so much rascality and degradation. Will a hundred a year buy you off and secure your silence ? ”

Gregory burst into a loud laugh.

“ A hundred a year ! - Come ! I thought I was worth more than that to you, Carthew, anyhow ! Add a nought, and we'll talk about it. A hundred a year ?—and an upper servant gets more ! Why, man, are you dreaming ? and to *me*, your equal in all things save just that one item of money—in manners, education, birth—yes ! you need not frown, Jasper ; my father was a gentleman, if ruined and a roué, and my mother was a Seymour, if on the wrong side ; still there is the blood, however got : and now I am equal to you in the misfortune of a mistake, in the necessity of hiding away in a small country place under an assumed name, and in being forced to maintain my social position by lies and appearances. Yes ! the poor devil Gregory Field and my lord the Master of Croft, as they call you about here, are now in the same state ; and so, both rowing in the same boat, mon ami, we cannot foul each other's waters ! ”

“I have let you run on for as long as you liked,” returned Jasper in the same haughty manner; “it was useless to interrupt you. Now to return to the subject of my visit. I decline to give you a thousand a year, and I repeat my offer of one hundred. This too on condition that you leave Clive Vale, that you never trouble me again, and that you draw it in quarterly instalments when and how as I shall direct.”

“Make it two, Jasper.”

“I will not make it even guineas,” said Jasper.
“That or nothing.”

Gregory seemed to reflect.

“Well,” he then said musingly, “it may serve as the basis; I may accept it as part payment; I do not absolutely refuse to consider it in that light; one can do business in detail, you see, instead of in the grand. One hundred a year for my silence as to your real name and poor Lavinia’s trouble? Humph!” dubiously; “not too much; in fact, a beggarly amount! But I will not be hard; soit! I take you for that count. Now then,” tapping his fingers on the table at each word, “what will

you give me for my trump card, Jasper? Neither a hundred nor two hundred a year will buy that, my fine fellow, so never think it! Out of consideration for your feelings, I will not coarsely particularize; but I think you understand me pretty plainly, and know the name I keep back."

"I understand no insinuations," said Jasper. "What you have to say, say out. Is it not enough that I should have you at my heels for what is open and confessed between us, but must I endure all manner of obscure hints and inuendoes, leading God knows where? I entertain nothing—mark this—that is not plain and definite; I pay for no mysteries, Field, if forced to pay for crimes not my own."

"I am kinder to you than you are to yourself," sneered Gregory. "Besides, mon cher, there is a certain indelicacy in your nakedness of speech that revolts me. When a gentleman has an unpleasant fact in his possession, why stick it on a pole and thrust it in at the drawing-room windows to scare modest folks out of their senses? Why not just delicately indicate its existence—

which would be enough for all people not so farouche and savage as yourself, Jasper? I know what I know; which is more than you do, mon ami, else you would have been a little more careful in some of your late actions in life; but, as I do not want to ruin you, and as the restitution of certain conditions would do no one any good, I am content to take my ugly fact to an underground market, and make the best terms I can for myself out of it. I value it simply as money—as capital of which you must pay the interest. But mind you, it must be a heavy interest; else I am afraid the drawing-room windows of Clive Vale will see something they would rather not see, for all that Mr. Jasper Trelawney is no great favourite among them, and there are few who would weep at his downfall. Still, you know," speaking very deliberately, "other interests beside those of Mr. Jasper Trelawney are at stake, and a country village always defends its own."

"All this is child's play," said Jasper. "Tell me what you want and what you mean. Give me proof of what you insinuate; do you take me

for a child to be frightened by a scarecrow dressed up and thrust into my face when you want to get more money out of me? If you have, as you say, another secret in your possession, and one even more fatal to my life and happiness than those we know of, tell me plainly what it is, and we can then bargain for its price. I buy nothing in the dark ; not even secrets and mysteries."

" You bought one thing once pretty much in the dark," sneered Gregory. " If you had had your eyes open then, you would not have required quite so much pepper and salt in them now to make you see your own interest. However, that is nothing to the purpose. Suit yourself as to your manner of transacting business ; I have chosen my way, and shall not move from it. I hold my story, but will sell the copyright, say for eight hundred a year. If this does not please you, bon ! I can turn the screw a little tighter and make better terms for myself at every pull. Remember the sibylline leaves, Jasper ; and remember too that a cautious man *may* outstay his market, and lose in the end because he would not realize in the beginning."

“ Give me proof,” said Jasper.

He had grown quite white ; and for all his self-control, could not disguise his fear.

“ If you want proof, Jasper Carthew,” said Gregory slowly, “ I will give it ; but not to you. I will send it to the lady now living as your wife at Croft. You know me sufficiently well to be sure that, if driven, I would do even that, much as I hate unnecessary cruelty or éclat. I have however the rights of my own to protect ; and if forced—forced, mind—into protecting them by assailing the false position of others, I must do it, coûte qui coûte.”

“ She died,” said Jasper with quivering lips ; “ seven years ago she died.”

“ At Funchal ? ” Gregory returned, interrogatively.

“ You yourself wrote me the notification,” said Jasper.

He laughed.

“ I know I did, but it was false for all that. Just then there seemed a chance of a good thing, if we could Burke you ; so, as we could not do that,

we buried ourselves instead. But it was a flam, Jasper, I am sorry for you to say. She is not dead; she is living."

"Let me see her," cried Jasper. "What can I believe in such a network of lies as you weave round me, and yourself, and everything you touch? To be convinced that this is more true than the other I must see her with my own eyes."

"As you will!" said the other shrugging his shoulders. "Take your own way, of course; but I advise you not. She knows nothing of you now; she has lost all trace of you, and with your change of name cannot track you. It was by the merest accident that I fell upon you, and she is not likely to repeat it. She is married now, pauvre petite femme; the mother of children whom she can claim; and living in peace and respectability in a charming little ménage out by Auteuil. Why trouble her repose? I do not wish to include her in the matter at all, except to keep her tranquil by supplying her with money as she may need it; so that she shall have no thought of hunting you up, which assuredly I should not prevent but assist,

if you do not make it worth my while to protect you. You know she would have a handsome allowance if the law interposed, and I should share with her ; so that, in letting you off with even half your fortune, I am doing better for you than the law would if it caught you ; and better for her too, *cette pauvre petite*, for you are far before her present *bonhomme* in money value. Now come, what do you say ? I will marchander with you ; give me five hundred down, Jasper, and I will engage to keep quiet for two years. There, now ! I have reached my lowest. I give you a start of two years, and before the end of that time you may have cleared tracks for New Zealand or Timbuctoo, and all trace of you be lost for ever. Five hundred for a two years' silence—for two years' life and happiness ! If not—" he whistled, " I have but to do that before a certain door, and your present life, your wife, your children, your station, everything has gone like the baseless fabric of a dream. Dream is it, or vision ? Vision, I think ! Make your game," he continued, turning one foot over his knee and hold-

ing on by the shin and ankle ; “mine *is* made ; and the devil take me if I budge an inch ! ”

There was silence for some moments ; then Gregory said, still nursing his leg whilst playing with the tongue of his boot, “I shall be very sorry to proceed to extremities, Jasper, for I confess my heart sinks when I think of the consequences. What you will do I cannot divine ; I do not suppose you will like to have *her* back again ; and anyhow, you will have to fight the young brother here of course. And those poor children !—that fine little beggar in the grey knickers, the heir of the estate now—and then—ah ! it will be a sad ruin ! The lady will probably die, poor thing ; and it is to be hoped she will ; but die or not, it will be an awful smash, and many a year’s talk for the Vale to fatten on. Good Lord ! if it was my case, I would give the very shirt off my back to avert it ; and here is a man chaffering for a paltry five hundred to save the woman he loves from disgrace and probable death ! Think, Jasper, just for one moment—picture what I am picturing—see the things I am seeing—God, man ! give me your

whole fortune—Croft, and all that is yours—to save them from such ghastly ruin ! And as I live it will come upon you, unless you make such terms with me as will enable me to buy off Lavinia and save myself from ruin.”

He had risen while he said these last words, as if in the earnestness and vehemence of the moment ; and now stood fronting Jasper, looking fixedly at him, though in general not fond of scanning his face too closely.

White and bloodless, his head bent forward, his bloodshot eyes gazing into vacancy with that look of dumb despair more painful to witness than any tears or fiery passion, his tall figure neither shrunk nor bowed but standing motionless and rigid as if stiffened into stone, his hand clenched till the knuckles were white and the nails were cutting through the skin, large drops upon his forehead and hanging thick on his moustache, and the laboured breath of a man in a deadly struggle ; this was what the dark, lithe, snake-like figure watching him looked at as his work. And callous as he was when the question was of his own ad-

vantage, even Gregory Dysart felt a certain impulse of compassion as he looked at him.

“Poor devil!” he half muttered; “I wish I could have done it without.”

They stood thus for many minutes; what seemed an hour to Gregory; what was an eternity of woe to Jasper. Then, with the sigh of a man awaking from a dream, almost with a start, he said in a hollow voice, “I will buy you; give me a pen.”

Gregory dipped a pen in ink and handed it to him silently; and Jasper wrote on a sheet of paper an order to his banker “to pay to Mr. Gregory Dysart, or order, the sum of five hundred pounds.”

The next day Gregory wrote to Madame Trébuchet, Rue Saint Antoine, Paris.

END OF VOL. I.



